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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEB., 1978
VOL. 42, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE DIOGENES MURDERS

by Brett Halliday

When Shayne turned down A.Y. Owen as a client, he had no idea the meat-packing millionaire was literally in the act of being murdered before his eyes. So, when the dead man's ex-wife asked the redhead to run down her husband's killer, Shayne took on the assignment as a matter of conscience as well as a matter of cash — and found he had stirred up a hornet's nest

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THE DIOGENES MURDERS

When Shayne turned down meat-packing millionaire A.Y. Owen as a client he had no idea that Owen was already as good as dead. But when Owen's widow hired him to find the killer the redhead quickly discovered that he himself had been marked for murder.



by Brett Halliday

THE SUN-BRONZED BALD HEAD of A.Y. Owen glowed softly in the reflected light of the Jack Tar III's cabin as he lifted his eyes to meet Mike Shayne's and said, "Well, Shayne, are you with me?"

The detective took a deep breath, then shook his red head slowly. "I'm sorry, Owen," he

said, "but body-guarding is not my line of work. If your own man" — with a head-gesture toward the deck beyond the closed cabin door — "can't do it, the police are far better equipped for this sort of work than I am. Or any of the large private agencies. I can give you —"

"Dammit, Shayne!" The



hitherto soft-spoken millionaire erupted in a roar of frustration. "I'm not asking you to babysit for me. I'm asking you to find out who is behind the attempts on my

life. That's all. Once I know, I can take care of myself."

"They could have been accidents." Mike Shayne spoke mildly.

"Three tries in six days?" Owen had regained his self control although his big body looked ready to burst through the costly casual clothing that covered it. "All of them following that damned telecast Sunday evening? It's sheer bull luck I'm alive or at least not in a hospital."

He paused, his blue eyes all but pleading with the Miami redhead. And this, Shayne knew, was a man of well justified self esteem, a man to whom pleading with anyone came like plucking out his own teeth.

"Shayne," he said, "I'll double your usual fee. Hell, I'll quadruple it. Dammit, man, I want to sleep in security."

The detective shook his head a second time, said, "Owen, your confidence in my somewhat limited abilities is touching. But in this case, I find it unjustified. All you have given me is a three-some of near-accidents that might or might not have been fatal — a brake failure in your Bugatti —"

"The master valve had been emptied."

" — a falling side of beef in your freezing plant that missed by a foot —"

"The rope had been cut by a knife."

" — and a fall from this boat while you were on the high seas."

"I didn't fall. I was pushed."

"Owen," the redhead went on, ignoring the interpolations, "I don't blame you for being scared.

But you have given me no viable leads toward who might want you out of the way or why — beyond the suggestion the so-called attempts all followed the Sunday night broadcast. All right, where is the tie that binds them?"

"Damned if I know." Owen's face took on a bulldog look. "But that's when they started. Just seven days back. See here, Shayne — six weeks ago, Sam Diener sent his Seven Little Dwarfs in to investigate upgrading in the meat packing industry in the Miami area. Two weeks ago, "Snow White" Sam arrived to take charge of the crusade. Last Sunday, the big expose via TV. Then the near-accidents began. I'm the biggest meat packer in Southern Florida. It has to tie in."

"Are you suggesting Sampson Diener is trying to have you wiped out? Why?"

A.Y. Owen sighed and rubbed his eyes, reached for the nearly empty highball glass at his elbow. "Don't ask me who's behind it. If I knew, I'd take care of myself. That's why I sent for you, Shayne. Did you see the telecast?"

The redhead nodded. "It looked pretty much like a blanket indictment," he said. "I don't remember you or your company being especially accused."

"We weren't," Owen said. "Nobody specific was accused. Nobody needed to be. Like you just said, a blanket indictment."

"A true indictment?" Shayne

prodded.

A.Y. Owen hesitated, then cocked his big head and said, "Sure, it's true. Why do you think Sam Diener has had so much success exposing alleged criminal activities in so-called legitimate industry? Because it *is* true, everywhere, right up and down the line. It always has been."

"The consumer is always the sucker," Mike Shayne intoned softly.

A.Y. Owen shrugged, said, "In China, three thousand years ago, they called it 'squeeze'."

"Okay." It was Shayne's turn to nod. "So how does this Sam Diener expose relate to the alleged attempts on your life?"

A.Y. Owen extended a heavy hand toward the silver tray to his right on the desk, lifted an eyebrow at the detective, who nodded, and poured him a generous refill of Martell cognac on the rocks, refilled his own glass with Jack Daniel's.

He said, "Shayne, according to the old Greek legend, Diogenes spent a lifetime looking for an honest man and never found one. Maybe it's a good thing he didn't, or Greece might have fallen long before it did. There would have been hell to pay."

Mike Shayne took a healthy pull at his drink, said, "Owen, you still haven't given me a smell of a lead. You have an excellent reputation according to our mutual friend, Gordon Howland. The real

reason I came out here tonight was because he can't imagine anyone wanting to kill you. So far, all you've given me is Sam Diener — and I'm not buying that. He's grown rich and powerful by being honest at others' expense."

Owen said, "Oh, I'm as honest as the next man, I guess — as honest as my business will allow. Which ain't saying much. Tell Gordy thanks from me when you talk to him. I take it you're not going to help me."

"I would if I could." The detective finished his glass and got to his feet. "But on what you've given me, you'd be wasting your money.

A.Y. Owen's tall lanky skipper rose from a wicker chair on the Jack Tar III's quarter deck where he had draped himself during Shayne's session with his employer in the saloon. It seemed to the redhead that the man's silhouette blotted out a considerable portion of the star-studded night sky over the marina.

"Take Mr. Shayné ashore, Jason," said Owen. "Then come back yourself. I'll be sleeping aboard."

"Aye-aye, Captain." Jason Jones saluted smartly, led Shayne to the companionway at whose foot a motor launch lay moored, its burnished brass fittings reflecting the porthole lights.

After saying goodbye to A.Y. Owen, who again expressed his

regret at the redhead's turndown of his offer, Shayne boarded the launch and was taken back to the wharf beyond which his Buick waited. He felt badly over refusing the meat packer's assignment, but he still did not see what he could do to earn a fee.

As they were coasting in to their berth at the wharf, Jason spoke for the first time. "You gonna help the skipper?"

"Afraid not," Shayne replied. "The offer was more than generous, but there's not a damn thing I can do."

"Somebody got to you first?" the mate suggested. "Too bad."

Then they were in and Jason was holding the launch against the wharf while Shayne scrambled ashore. No more was said between them.

Shayne drove back from the marina to his comfortable, somewhat old fashioned apartment hotel on Second Street with a persistent feeling of guilt gnawing at his conscience . . .

II

MIKE SHAYNE WAS still three-quarters asleep when he groped for and found the extension phone on his bedside table whose persistent ringing had finally penetrated his slumber.

"Shayne!"

The voice of Len Sturgis, Miami Chief of Detectives and its deep, sharp graveled tone brought him

instantly awake.

"Okay, Len — what's up?" The detective stifled a yawn as he pulled his naked body to an upright sitting position.

"You are — or will be in about five seconds. Get down to the North Bay Marina on the double. Or do you want me to send a car for you?"

Right then, Shayne knew. But he had to ask.

"Owen?"

"How'd you know?"

"An educated guess, Len. He had me out there last night. Said somebody was trying to kill him. Wanted me to find out who."

"Did you buy it, Mike?"

"Negative," Shayne told him. "The poor bastard couldn't give me a handle. I take it he's dead."

"As mutton."

"Get on out here and see for yourself."

"On my way."

Shayne splashed water on his face and neck, ran a comb through his red hair and hastily pulled on some clothes. He still felt like a single large sleep-seed twenty-five minutes later when, thanks to the light six a.m. traffic, he parked the Buick in a slot outside the North Bay Marina, where a police launch took him over glass-slick water to the companionway of the *Jack Tar III*.

If the large motor yacht had been empty save for its owner when Jason took him ashore eight hours earlier, it was now well pop-

ulated with Homicide detectives, a coroner's crew and members of the Harbor Police.

Len Sturgis, hulking three inches over the redhead's six-one and many pounds heavier, a vertical blimp flapping in the off-shore breeze, awaited him at the rail. After a laconic, "What took you so long?" he led Shayne inside the cabin, through the saloon where he and A.Y. Owen had conferred the night before, along a brief corridor, through a lavish master stateroom to the bathroom beyond.

The meat-packing millionaire lay naked in water already fouled by his own body fluids. The stench was nostril shocking as Sturgis opened the bathroom door.

A.Y. Owen's naked body looked flaccid in death. There was no suggestion of the powerful personality that had given it strength while living.

Shayne was only too glad to get out of there. He exhaled, then took a deep breath, noted that Sturgis did the same. A young man in a Glen plaid seersucker suit with a dark handlebar mustache was standing by the table in the saloon. He said, "No matter how many times you smell it, it still gets you."

Sturgis said, "Coroner's assistant."

"How'd he die?" the redhead asked.

The chief of detectives said, "Mike, did you spot that chalk

circle by the tub?"

Shayne nodded, said, "About the size of a bottle bottom."

"On the nose." Sturgis nodded. "Jack Daniel's?"

The coroner's assistant blenched behind his mustache, said, "Now how in hell did you know that?"

"Because he was drinking Jack Daniel's when I left him last night. What was in it?"

"Preliminary opinion — nembutal," the young man replied. He sounded shaken.

"Jesus, Len," said the redhead. "The poor bastard must have been killing himself while he was talking to me."

"Okay, so let's hear what it was all about, Mike. You didn't poison him, did you?"

Shayne did not dignify the question with a response. Instead, lighting a cigaret, he gave the chief of detectives a complete account of his earlier visit to the *Jack Tar III*, from Gordon Howland's call suggesting the meeting to Jason's cryptic final remark in the launch — "Somebody got to you first? Too bad."

"Did anyone get to you?" Sturgis asked.

"If anyone did, do you think I'd tell you?" Shayne replied. Then, "No, Len, that's the bit. I wish to hell now that . . ." He let it trail off.

"You'd have been too late," the chief of detectives told him. Once he got the mix of nembutal and

high proof whiskey in his gut, the only thing that could have saved him was a stomach pump. At least, he died easy — just fell asleep in a hot tub."

"I'm just glad I'm a cognac man." The redhead shuddered briefly. Then, "I suppose it was Jason who told you about me. Is he okay?"

Sturgis nodded, said, "He called it in a couple of hours ago when he found the body. I had him taken downtown for a statement."

"He's clean?"

"As clean as anybody could be, under the circumstances. If I didn't know you . . ." He let it hang.

"So what can I do? You know, Len, you're getting to have one hell of a time making a murder out of this."

"You're telling *me!* It's gonna be a bitch."

"But I'm sure it was murder, Len. A.Y. Owen didn't come through as a suicide type. How do you read Jason?"

"He held his cool while I talked to him," the chief of detectives replied. "But I got an impression of deep devotion to the late in there." This with a nod toward the bathroom. "Devotion and cold fury. If I was you, Mike, I'd wear eyes in the back of my skull for a while."

"He laid it on me?"

"Who else? Jesus, Mike, if this is murder — and we both damn well know it is — you're the logical

number-one suspect."

"You taking *me* downtown, too?" the redhead asked.

Sturgis shook his massive head. "Not likely. But what are you going to do about it?"

"What in hell *can* I do? The client I turned down is dead, so where's my case? I'm for hire, of course, if the Miami Homicide Bureau wants outside assistance."

"Get the hell out of here, will you?" Chief Sturgis' voice rose to half-roar.

Shayne moved toward the saloon door, then said, "Do you want me to swim?"

"Sergeant — take this man ashore!" This in fine, full stentorian bellow.

III

FEELING LIKE THE BOTTOM of an unswept parakeet cage, Shayne stopped at an open roadside restaurant for sorely needed coffee and breakfast. What he was served suited his current unshaven, unkempt condition if not his needs — brackish swampwater coffee, watery eggs with overcooked bacon, potatoes neither hashed nor brown, limp underdone toast with rancid margarine and a pair of pathetically drooping carrot curls.

He ate it only as a form of penance.

The redhead could not pin down any real reason for the feelings of guilt that consumed him — but

guilty he felt. His refusal to take on A.Y. Owen as a client was entirely justified in logic — the late meat-packing mogul had given him no information that would justify Shayne's accepting his money.

Furthermore, if he *had* taken the case, he would have been too late to save Owen. Unbeknownst to either of them, the man was already as good as dead when the detective left him at the top of the companionway.

Or *had* the wealthy packer been ignorant of his impending doom? Shayne pondered the point, decided there was no valid reason for his taking his own life.

Then, too, there lay the little matter of why Owen had been killed in just that way, in just that place, at just that time. Had there been other bottles of Jack Daniel's spiked with nembutal — say in the victim's home or at his office?

That would be up to Len Sturgis' expert crew to find out — but the detective doubted it.

Granted, there had been the three previous alleged attempts on the millionaire's life — the valve emptied of brake fluid, the sliced cord supporting a quarter-ton side of frozen beef, the push from the yacht while at sea — but these, if for real, all smacked more of opportunism than of cold premeditation.

Pushing away the gruesome remains of his breakfast, the redhead considered the possibility that the Jack Daniel's had been



spiked so that he would die that night, before he could employ one Mike Shayne to discover who was threatening his life.

If this were the case, whoever did it could have had no way of knowing the redhead would turn him down.

But who? The detective pondered.

Jason, for one — but, like Len Sturgis, Shayne had a gut feeling that the *Jack Tar III*'s first mate was a young man of integrity — and it seemed unlikely both Sturgis and he would gauge a man wrongly in this regard.

The redhead recalled what the chief of detectives had suggested as to his being on guard against Jason. Shayne smiled faintly, tugging at his left earlobe. Well, he'd be on his guard — until he had opportunity to talk to the man

and set him straight.

Laying on the table the two dollars his gruesome meal and tip demanded, Shayne pushed his chair back and left the restaurant. Since the morning was still early, instead of going directly to the office, he returned home to shave, bathe and put on some decent clothing . . .

It was after eleven o'clock when the detective entered his office.

Lucy Hamilton looked up from the telephone, regarded him with raised eyebrows, then shrugged, and put the instrument back in its cradle.

She said, "It's the damnedest thing, Michael — that's the third time in the last half hour. Somebody calls and then hangs up when I answer."

"Don't let it knock you, Angel," he said. "Probably some poor jerk with a wrong number and a lot of persistence. Oh?"

This as his charming secretary nodded toward the leather sofa against the wall to his left, blocked by the swing of the door as he opened it.

A lady sat there, a lady in a flowered silk print dress. She looked as if she had just stepped out of a beautician's chair from the careful set of her bright gold hair to the matching gilt of the toenails visible beneath nylons through the designed gaps in her soft expensive white leather shoes. The handbag at her side was mounted with what looked like solid gold

clasp and fittings.

As Lucy introduced him, the lady rose, matching the detective's six feet one in height, and smiled a half smile that did not quite crack the enamel of her face.

"I'm Laura Owen," she said. "I want you to find the man who murdered my husband."

Questions clamored in his mind as he ushered her into the inner office and got her seated in a chair across from his desk. Questions like, *How do you know your husband was murdered? Why have you come to me? Why aren't you in mourning?*

Seating himself, he said, "I feel very bad about your husband's death, Mrs. Owen — you are his wife, aren't you?"

"I was," she said in a sand-paper-husky voice that somehow was not unattractive. "Alfred and I were divorced years ago — but we remained close. He was a good man, Mr. Shayne, a very good man. I want you to find out who killed him."

Shayne shafted a quick uplook at her beneath his craggy red eyebrows, said, "You know, Mrs. Owen, the police are not yet certain it was murder."

She uttered a bark of derision, said, "Mr. Shayne, Alfred called me last night after you left him. He told me you had turned him down as a client. He was angry but not despondent. And he was not the man to kill himself merely because his life was threatened."

Alfred was a fighter from the word go!"

"Mrs. Owen —" he began.

"For God's sake, call me Lo — everybody does."

"Lo then," he replied. "How did you learn your ex-husband is dead?"

"Jason called me when he found him in the bathtub. And I want you to find the bastard who did him in."

'Did him in?' Shayne had not heard the phrase in years. He managed not to gulp, said, "I'm going to have to tell you what I told Mr. Owen last night — I can't take a client's money unless I feel I can do him — or her — a job. In a case like this, the police, I promise you, are a thousand times better equipped than I am. Len Sturgis is no fool — he doesn't buy the suicide idea either. But proving murder and running down whoever committed it are going to be damned difficult."

"Since when has Mike Shayne been afraid to tackle the difficult? If I'm willing to spend my money on you, you ought to be willing to try to earn it."

She had him there. Shayne spread his hands, then reached behind him and drew a half-empty bottle of Martell from the bottom drawer of the green filing cabinet against the wall. He looked at her inquiringly. She nodded. He got out the glasses, went to the tiny cooler-refrigerator and put ice in them, half-filled hers, looked in-

quiringly at her again.

"On the rocks," she said in her Gravel Gertie voice.

"Be my guest." He filled both glasses, offered her one. They lifted them and drank. When he put his down half empty, she put hers down drained to the bottom.

"Okay, Lo," he said. "What do you know that I should know?"

She hesitated, shook her head at his pantomimed offer of a refill. In the outer office, Shayne heard the buzz of the phone, followed two seconds later by an unusual muttered four-letter expletive as Lucy slammed the instrument back in its cradle.

Shayne suppressed an impulse to smile. He judged the anonymous telephone caller had rung again and hung up, masked his amusement by finishing his drink.

"How much did Alfred tell you?" Lo Owen asked.

"About what?"

"About himself — about his friends, his enemies."

"Damned little," the detective told her. "His premise seemed to be that, if it was somebody he knew that was after him, he'd know it and wouldn't need me. That's one of the reasons I had to turn him down."

"That sounds just like the old goat." His former wife shook her golden head. "He thought he could handle anything — give him credit, he damn near could."

"You think somebody close to him poisoned that bottle?" the

redhead asked.

"Somebody had to get close enough to do it. Somebody had to know him well enough to know he drank only Jack Daniel's."

"What about Jason?"

"Jason Jones?" She sounded astonished by the question. "Jason was like a one-man dog — and that man was Alfred. He would gladly have died for him. He'd probably have killed for him. But only *for* him. Alfred practically raised Jason from a pup. His old man skippered Alfred's first yacht, the *Jack Tar I*. He was drowned at sea saving Alfred's life — and my husband spoon-fed Jason from then on."

"Okay — scratch Jason for now. Who else?"

"Ever hear of T.O. Agronski?" Lo Owen asked.

"The labor organizer?"

Lo Owen snorted. "Labor racketeer is more like it. He and Alfred were always at each other's throats. T.O. kept trying to nationalize Florida South — that was Alfred's company. Alfred wanted to keep it a company union. Things got pretty dirty more than once and Alfred always won. I know it's corny to say all Alfred's men loved him, but enough of them did to hold the line."

"You think Agronski hated your ex enough to have him killed?"

"I suppose it's possible."

"Okay," said Shayne. "Who else?"

"For starters, I can give you Alfred's secretary, Ruthanne Reilly. She's the one that really screwed up our marriage. She thought she had the inside track when Alfred dumped me, but I fixed her wagon — but good."

"He married Dana Holding, the actress, instead — and there's another for your list. She married Alfred to get money for her boyfriend, Lou Allen, but Alfred found out about it and stopped the cash flow. She's been hanging on, just waiting for Alfred to die, but I've got news for her — she's getting a handful of you-know-what."

"Any connection with Sampson Diener?" the redhead asked. "Your ex seemed to think the fun and games started right after his television exposé of the meat packing industry."

IV

LO OWEN CHEWED her lower lip with what looked like her own original teeth. The ferret-sharp dark brown eyes that gave the lie to her golden hair lost focus briefly, then came back, hard and sharp, looking directly at the detective's grey orbs.

She said, "My personal private jury is still out on 'Snow White' Sam. I can't believe any operator like Diener is all that simon-pure — until I remember that being pure has made him rich and famous. Even so . . ."

She shrugged, added, "Let the chips fall and all that. But business, like politics, is based on echelons of control. You know that as well as I do."

"You mean it's a matter of who knows where what bodies are buried."

"Exactly." Lo's nod was crisp. "It's not that everybody's crooked, but greed is the name of the game. I remember A.Y. once telling me that business is no place for an honest man."

"He said something to that effect last night," the redhead told her.

"Well, when a man like Diener turns up and starts letting the public in on what really goes on in this business, there's hell to pay. There are no control buttons to punch. Diener's personal record is an open book.

"Now, upgrading the labels on beef is a practice that must have started before the fall of Babylon. It's not exactly dangerous to the public to tag *Good* beef as *Choice* and the best *Choice* as *Prime*. Of course, that way, it costs the public a little more per pound."

"What about government inspectors?" Shayne asked."

"They, too, are human — some of them. When they aren't there are other ways — counterfeit official stamps for one — but inspectors have kids that get sick and they want better cars like everybody else. Not all meat is upgraded, but a sizable percentage

is. Say each upgrade lifts the wholesale price per pound by ten cents. That runs to two hundred dollars per ton. And when you're selling thousands of tons per annum, it's big money."

"But if your ex played ball, as he said he did, why would Diener's telecast make him vulnerable to murder? That's the stumbling block. That's why I turned him down."

Lo Owen plucked a thin lower lip, frowned, then said, "Shayne, a couple of days ago, over the phone, A.Y. did drop one possible hint. I didn't make much of it then — I thought he was whistling in the dark over the tries to murder him. He said something like, 'Those boys had better get off my back or I'll get on theirs. And I know just how to do it.' "

The detective tugged at his left earlobe, frowned, said, "So far, apart from the Diener possibility, you've given me Ruthanne Reilly, Dana Holding Owen, her boyfriend, Lou Allen, and T.O. Agron-ski. That's quite a list."

"How do you want me to make out the retainer check?" Lo Owen asked him.

Shayne took her to the outer office and turned her over to Lucy to fill out the formal agreement-contract. Then he went back to his desk, poured himself another Martell on the rocks and, sipping it, considered ways and means of getting an investigation under way.

He heard Lucy usher his new

client out, looked up moments later to see his secretary standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to the bank," she told him in her soft, pleasant voice. "And I'm meeting Mary Lou Adams for lunch. Okay?"

"Okay," he replied. "If I have to leave before you get back, Angel, I'll have the answering service take over. Give my regards to Mary Lou."

Mike Shayne was sitting there, pondering how best to get the job under way when the telephone rang. He picked it up, said, "Shayne here," to be greeted by silence, then by the hum of a dial tone as the instrument was returned to its cradle.

Son of a bitch! he thought. Wryly, he recalled how cavalierly he had dismissed Lucy's annoyance. It had, he thought, happened too often now to be so dismissed. But what, he pondered, could you do about it?

Call the phone company and register a beef . . . ?

The instrument rang again and, much to his annoyance, the detective jumped. Picking up the handset, he said, "You four-letter bastard, what in hell do you think you're trying to prove?"

"Hold it, Mike — what did I do?" The voice was that of his long-time journalist friend, Tim Rourke of the Miami *Daily News*.

"Sorry, Tim," Shayne said. "Some joker's been playing Mickey Mouse with the office

phone. What's on your mind?"

"A.Y. Owen's death. The grapevine has it you were out on that yacht of his last night just before he kicked the bucket."

"For once, the grapevine is right, Tim."

"What did he want?"

Shayne told him, adding that he had turned down the offer, and why.

Tim said, "He tied it in with the Diener expose?"

"That's one of the reasons I turned him down. It was too damned far-fetched to buy . . . and he gave me no valid leads."

"You're working on it now?" Rourke said.

The redhead hesitated, then said, "You might say so — A.Y.'s widow just laid it in my lap."

"Larruping Lo?" The reporter sounded surprised and amused.

"Laura Hayes Owen."

"What a character!" Tim chuckled. "Lo Owen is the best balloon buster and applecart up-setter on the whole Miami social scene. Your client?"

Feeling slightly huffy, Shayne said, "How come I've never heard of her before if she's so famous?"

"How much time," said the journalist, "do you spend in perusal of the society pages of our gazettes, my fine, full-feathered friend?"

Shayne hung up, amusement replacing annoyance. He was half-smiling when he lifted the half-empty Martell to his lips — and

froze as he gazed at the tall, lanky male figure that was filling the doorway between the two offices.

"What's so God damned amusing, Shayne?" Jason Jones' voice was bitter as he looked down on the detective and took a step toward him.

Mike Shayne rose to his feet just in time to parry a vicious blow from a two-foot broom handle the mate of the *Jack Tar III* had been holding against his right thigh. His forearm ached from the force of the blow, which had missed his head by a mere two inches.

"Easy, Jason," he said. "I'm not the —"

He had no time to say more as the vengeance-minded mariner swung again. This time, the redhead ducked under the blow, which whistled just above his head.

His original intent had been to fend off Jason's onslaught until he could talk some sense into the enraged younger man. But the violence of both blows, coming so close to their target, caused him to alter his tactics radically.

He had no wish to hurt his opponent but from here on in it was a matter of self defense.

Reaching upward, he got a two-handed grip on the younger man's zippered peajacket and pulled him forward against the other side of the desk as a third blow with the broom handle ricocheted off the filing cabinet and smashed the bottle of Martell on the desk-top.

Shayne brought his head up hard, butting Jason's pointed chin with the thickest part of his forehead, just under the hairline. The intruder grunted, some of the steam taken out of him. The detective plucked his Colt .45 from its shoulder rig and, in a single swift motion, brought the barrel with near-surgical precision hard against Jason's left temple.

Jason fell with his upper body on the desk, cutting his cheek on a jagged piece of the just-broken bottle, lay there like a collapsed sack, out colder than an Arctic night.

Even so, it took all of the detective's strength to pry his attacker's fingers loose from the broom handle he had wielded so menacingly moments before . . .

V

METHODICALLY, WHILE Jason was still unconscious, Mike Shayne cleaned up the mess. First Jason — the detective moved him back into the visitor's chair across the desk, seating him there and checking the cut on his cheek from which a rivulet of bright blood was slowly flowing inside the collar of his peajacket. Shayne blocked it with a bit of paper towel, as toilet paper is used to staunch a shaving cut, then used the rest of the towel to wipe away the blood.

The bruise on the seaman's temple was already turning from red to blue, would in time be

purple.

This done, Shayne used other paper towels to mop up the mess left on his desk top by the broken Martell bottle. For two reasons, he was thankful little cognac had remained in the fifth. One, not much was wasted — two, there was less to mop up.

By the time the detective had finished and dumped the last bit of broken glass in the wastebasket, Jason was beginning to regain consciousness with slight stirrings and moans.

Mike Shayne put the sawed-off broom handle on top of the filing cabinet, dug a fresh bottle of Martell out of the bottom drawer, opened it, poured himself another drink. He was seated on a corner of the desk, glass in one hand, cigaret in the other, when Jason finally opened his eyes.

Gradually, they unglazed and focused on the detective. "Jesus!" he said. "Did you have to hit me so hard?"

"You," replied Shayne, "started it. Remember?"

"I must have gone crazy." Jason put his head in his hands and squeezed it tightly between them, as if afraid his skull would explode otherwise. He said, "I thought you killed Mr. Owen."

"You don't think so now?" said the redhead.

"No. You'd have killed *me* if you did it. God, Mr. Shayne, what'd you hit me with?"

"I had to coldcock you." Shayne

poured a stiff drink, stood over Jason, made the younger man drink it. He coughed and sputtered but managed to get it down.

With his recent assailant's recovery thus furthered, the detective said, "For your private file, Jason, nobody 'got to me' as you alleged last night. I turned Owen down because he didn't give me any information to work on. I'd have been taking his money for nothing if I'd accepted his offer."

"The police — that big plain-clothes man — tried to tell me that this morning, but I was too browned off to buy it. I guess I was wrong."

"Something else for your private file, Jason. — I'm working for Laura Owen now."

"She hired you?" For a long moment, Jason looked at the detective incredulously. Then he seemed to relax, said, "If Mrs. Owen okays you, you're okay with me."

It was a simple statement of trust.

"Jason." Shayne offered the mariner a cigaret which was refused. "I want you to work with me. I was planning to come and see you and clear things up, but you took your own initiative. I need your help. In fact, I've got a hunch I'm going to need all the help I can get on this one."

"But I don't — I mean, how can I help you?"

Shayne tamped out his own cigaret, stood up, said, "The third

attempt, when Owen was pushed overboard — you were on the *Jack Tar III* that afternoon?"

"Last Thursday — sure. But I was in the pilot house, keeping her nose in the waves. The weather was choppy and I had my mind on the job."

"Who pulled Owen out?"

"I did." Jason said it simply. "I got Dawkins to take over the helm — he was right behind me — and jumped overboard. A couple of passengers threw in life preservers and I was able to get him out. It was nothing much. But I didn't see who pushed him in. I didn't have a chance."

"Understood." Shayne nodded, fired up anew. "But you know who was aboard. Passengers and crew."

"I guess so. I can check with Dawkins and the others."

"Who's Dawkins?"

Jason explained. The *Jack Tar iii* was a three-man operation. A.Y. Owen had been the nominal captain, but Jason took over as skipper whenever the owner was not aboard or when social duties forced him to yield the wheel. There was an engineer, Dake Williams, who kept the engines running, and Pete Dawkins as crew and all-around backup man. There was also Alfonzo, who doubled as chef and steward when the late meat packer did large scale entertainment.

"I was the only one who lived aboard year 'round," Jason con-



cluded.

"How did the crew feel about Owen? Was their attitude much like yours?"

"Pretty much," said the mariner. "Maybe not quite — after all, Mr. Owen was like a second father to me."

"Mrs. Owen told me," said Shayne. "Now, what about the passengers? Oh, and did any of the crew see who pushed Owen into the water?"

"Not likely. We were all too busy. But the passengers — let's see . . . There was Mrs. Owen — the second Mrs. Owen — and Mr. Allen — he's a sportsman, sort of

— and Ruthanne Reilly, Mr. Owen's secretary, and some boy-friend whose name I didn't get. Then there was Mr. Agronski, the labor union fellow — he and Mr. Owen were, like friendly enemies — and *his* lady. I think that's all, Mr. Shayne."

"Okay, Jason. Tell me, who did Owen think pushed him in? Did he talk to you about it?"

"Yes, sir — that evening, after the guests went home. He didn't know. He told me he wouldn't put it past Mr. Agronski, but whoever it was, he didn't get a look. He went on deck alone — the others were in the cabin — and was pushed over the side."

"Who saw him go in?"

"Nobody, sir. He let out a yell and I heard it — I was downwind, thank God. And, well, you know the rest."

"Jason, I only wish I did. I don't suppose you were around the other two times."

"No, sir."

"Any idea who brought the bottle aboard, Jason? The one with the poison?"

"It must have been me, Mr. Shayne." Bright spots of color suddenly appeared on the young man's cheeks. "Part of my job is bringing the food and drink aboard. Alfonzo orders it at the house. It's delivered there and I take it to the marina and put it aboard."

"Any idea *when* you brought that particular bottle?"

"Probably yesterday morning, sir. I put a carton of liquor on board. I saw a Jack Daniel's label when I put the bottles on the shelves."

There was more, but that was about it. Jason was still there when Lucy returned from lunch. Shayne introduced them, said, "Don't worry about those phone calls, Angel. Jason is the culprit."

"Gee, Mr. Shayne." Jason's eyes went wide. "How'd you guess?"

"Obvious, Jason. You wanted to see me. So you kept hanging up until I answered and you knew I was here. Not very smart, I'm afraid, Jason. You'd have done better being open. But that's under the bridge — right?"

"Right!" The younger man extended a tentative hand, which Shayne accepted. He added, "Mr. Shayne, you listen to Laura Owen. She's as smart as they come."

He left then. From the window, Shayne and Lucy watched him drive from the parking lot at the rear of the building in a Jeep painted Navy grey.

"He seems like a nice simple kid," Lucy remarked.

"That's about it," Shayne replied.

"I was wondering how he hurt his head," Lucy remarked. "But I was afraid to ask."

Shayne took a deep breath, gave Lucy a friendly pat, said, "Well, it's time I got to work. If Tim calls back, tell him I'll try to

meet him in The Beef House sometime after eight."

VI

THE TEMPORARY OFFICE setup of Sampson Wills Diener and his staff comprised a suite of convention showrooms on the second floor of the old Hotel Ponce in downtown Miami. While waiting to be admitted to the sanctum of Diener himself, who had readily agreed to see the detective via telephone, Shayne got a distinct impression of youth and well organized dedication.

Most of the underlings wore blue denims, all seemed busy at various chores. Just before the pretty receptionist told the redhead Mr. Diener would see him, Shayne heard a burst of quiet laughter from a trio of young women gathered around the water cooler in a corner, heard one of them say, "Oh, no — not Roger! He's such a *square!*"

Diener himself, while he wore a checked sports jacket and a turtle-neck, looked a young forty-odd and had unfashionably short hair. He received the detective with a handshake, motioned him to a chair before resuming his seat behind a plain grey steel desk adorned with two telephones and little else.

He regarded Shayne intently with slightly narrowed light blue eyes, shook his head and said, "Naturally, we want to do any-

thing we can to find Owen's killer. The only trouble is, I don't know what in hell we can do. It's not as if he were a special target — his firm is one of four we plan to cover in our second telecast Sunday evening. As a matter of fact, we're planning to go easy on him. His operation was well above average for this area — not that it's saying much."

"Owen seemed to feel his life was threatened as a result of your investigation," the detective replied. "I was hoping you might have some clue to the tie-in."

"But there is no tie-in, Shayne," said the industrial crusader. "We seldom if ever deal directly with the firms we investigate. Our concern is with the quality of their product. We test that in our own labs."

"Owen felt differently," the redhead replied. "He told me so himself yesterday evening. And he is dead."

"That still leaves us nowhere, Shayne," Sam Diener frowned. Then, after a moment, "I'll let you talk to Andy Whiting. He's the field chief in charge of the Florida meat-packing investigation. Perhaps he . . ." Another pause, then, "If he did find any significant connection, he failed to inform us."

He spoke into a desk intercom, then said to the detective, "Alice will show you the way."

One of the girls in blue denim led Shayne down a corridor to

another office. In this one the desk was piled high with reports and mémoranda. Whiting, a thirty-ish man built like a bricklayer with near-black eyes and hair, sighed when Shayne relayed his conversation with Diener.

"Sam's got his head in the clouds as usual — which is a good thing for the cause," he replied. "But frankly, we always get a lot of flak and feedback when we dig into any industry. Hell, they're always running to their pet senators or congressmen to have us stopped when they find they can't do business with us. Sometimes the going gets sticky — mighty sticky."

"You get any feedback from Owen?" the redhead asked.

Whiting wagged his head. "Not a hell of a lot. Naturally, he doesn't — didn't — exactly love us. Hell, he was numero uno in the packing industry around here."

He paused, shook his head, said, "Hell, Shayne, I didn't even know they raised beef cattle in Florida until this investigation got under way."

"Would you say it was rougher this time than usual?"

Whiting shrugged. "About average, I'd say. Well, I hope you find A.Y.'s murderer — if he was murdered. He wasn't a bad s.o.b. — for a mogul. But I don't see how I can help. If I turn up anything, I'll give you a ring."

Shayne left his card and got out of there . . .

His next stop — only four blocks from the Ponce and therefore within easy walking distance, was the low-slung grey stucco building in which T.O. Agronski was housed.

Where the Diener operation was casual and pasted together, the labor organizer's operation was smaller, far quieter and closer to opulent. His ash blonde receptionist might have stepped from the pages of an upper-case girlie magazine, while Agronski wore a nail-head sharkskin suit over a cornflower blue shirt and white knit tie. The face above was weathered by Florida sunshine to the hue of pickled walnut, the low hairline suggested either a transplant or a toupee. The brown eyes that studied Shayne from deep sockets were ferretlike in their brightness and intensity. His conversation was rapid-fire and richly sprinkled with profanity.

"Kee-rist, man, I was on that loving tub he called a yacht when old A.Y. took that dive. If you ask me, the so-and-so was smashed — he'd been tanking up for a couple of hours before he went overboard. If anyone there wanted to give him a shove, it damn well had to be me. He's been a roadblock in the path-of progress for twenty-five years with the cockamamie company union of his."

"Did you push him?" the detective asked:

"Me? Jesus, no! I was in the head, puking my loving guts out when it happened. Man, I was sea-

sick! I didn't even know A.Y. took a bath until I came out and saw that boy of his hoist him out of the loving drink."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then regarded Shayne intently before saying, "Shayne, I hope you get who did it. I loving well don't buy the suicide idea. The old goat just wasn't the type. Just between us, I'm going to leave early and go home and get loving well smashed. I'm going to miss the crusty old bastard. Now get the hell out of here."

Mike Shayne got. He received a distinct impression that the supposed-to-be-hard-as-nails labor organizer was on the verge of bursting into tears.

He wondered if Agronski cried easily . . .

Shayne's next visit was to the glass-glittering new high-rise office building further downtown which housed the executive and business offices of the Florida South Packing Company. There, he drew a blank. Ruthanne Reilly, A.Y. Owen's personal secretary, had departed twenty minutes earlier and was not expected back that day.

He asked the young lady who brought him this information if Miss Reilly had seemed visibly shaken by word of her employer's death. The girl hesitated briefly, then nodded, saying, "Ruthanne looked plenty shaken when she left."

Shayne thanked her and took off

himself. There were a number of questions he wanted to ask A.Y.'s secretary. After all, according to his client, Reilly had had designs on her employer at the time of his divorce from Lo — designs Lo herself had effectively scotched according to her account.

Reilly was in a position to know what was really going on — and she, too, had been aboard with a "boyfriend" when Owen was pushed or fell from the deck of the *Jack Tar III*. Shayne wondered who the "boyfriend" had been. It probably would mean little or nothing as far as the murder was concerned, but still . . .

It was past two o'clock and the redhead was hungry. Diagonally across the street from the Florida South offices was the marquee of a new subterranean restaurant of which he had heard favorable reports. It was called the Gold Doubloon.

Since the rush-hour lunch crush was past, Shayne had no trouble getting a banquette to himself. If the restaurant was over-ornate by the detective's standards, it was pleasantly so.

The walls were of gold-flecked glass over a room-girdling mural of coral reefs and wrecked galleons on an ocean bottom featuring occasional foreground designs of open treasure chests from which large golden coins seemed to flow.

The menu was West Indian, high priced and fancy for the detective's meat-and-potatoes taste.

He settled for a sirloin steak, hoping it would be sufficiently rare to suit him, and by request, without sauce.

The waiter sighed but took the order. Looking around, Shayne spotted S.W. Diener and Andy Whiting seated in a booth diagonally across the room. They were just finishing their lunch and paused as they passed his banquette on their way out of the restaurant.

"Any progress, Shayne?" the industrial crusader paused to ask him.

"It's still early in the game," the detective replied.

Whiting said, "I've been told that if a murderer isn't caught within forty-eight hours, it's five to one he never will be."

"This murder," said Shayne, "is only fourteen hours old. So we're still in the running."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed," Whiting said. They went on out of the restaurant.

To the redhead's surprise, the food lived up to rumor. His cut was thick, charcoaled outside, blood rare within. The potato had not been steamed in foil but baked in its own jacket and with it was a hot vegetable salad that looked overelaborate but tasted fine. The food was washed down with his usual two double-Martells on the rocks.

His energies restored, Mike Shayne paid the tab and departed, walking across the pavement toward the lot where his Buick was

parked. The sun was hazy-bright and, for the moment, he felt at peace with the world.

But for his years of living with danger, of surviving with death ever at his elbow, he would not have reached the other side of the street alive.

AS HE NEARED the white traffic divider stripe in its center, out of the left corner of his eye, Shayne sensed rather than saw a car pull out from the sidewalk he had just left. It occurred so quickly that a subconscious alarm system buried deep in his bank of experience signalled that this move could have happened so swiftly only if the car were waiting with its motor idling and, as such, was suspect.

Quickly, Shayne spun left, saw the vehicle, a pearl-grey convertible, coming directly for him and accelerating at an alarming pace . . .

If he tried to leap forward in an effort to escape, the redhead realized instantly that he would be picked up by the car's onrushing radiator grille, carried with it and either be tossed ahead of it or crushed beneath its radial tires.

Therefore, continuing his leftward spin, he took a desperate plunging leap backward in the direction from which he had just come.

Mike Shayne made it — but only by an eyelash. He could actually feel the air current caused by the onrushing grey vehicle against

his ankles as it raced away toward the corner.

Then the detective landed joltingly hard on the pavement and slid a dozen feet on his face, knees and elbows, just managing to keep his chin from being scraped. He ended up a foot from the tire of a delivery van whose driver had barely braked to a halt.

Leaning out the window, the driver, a young man with Garbo length brown hair, yelled at him.

"Are you crazy?"

"Not quite." Shayne pulled himself to a sitting position, looked around for the car that had so nearly killed him in time to see its rear end disappear around a corner in a screech of burning rubber.

Using the van's bumper, the redhead pulled himself upright, accepting the help of the young driver who had leapt from within it to assist him.

"Did you get the make of that car?" Shayne barked.

The youth shook his head, said, "I was too busy trying not to run you down. Are you okay?"

The detective looked down at himself. The knees of his carefully pressed slacks were in ribbons and there was a tear in the left elbow of his jacket. The left side of his face felt sandpapered and his whole frame was beginning to ache, especially his left ribs, where his shoulder rig had been pushed against them with

bone-jolting force.

"You okay, man?" the van driver asked.

Mike Shayne took a deep breath. It hurt like hell, so much so that he wondered if a few ribs weren't broken. But he managed an, "I'll be okay. Just give me a minute."

"Okay, okay. I thought you were trying to kill yourself."

"I'm just glad your brakes held." The detective tried a smile but that hurt, too.

A new voice said, "What's goin' on here?" Then, "Migod, it's Mike Shayne!"

A police black-and-white had pulled alongside and the officer in the right hand seat was peering at him curiously. He added, "You been in a fight, Mr. Shayne?"

"You're Mike Shayne — the detective?" the van driver asked.

"That's the rumor," Shayne replied. With an effort, he straightened up, told the youth he was grateful, then assured the officers he could operate under his own steam.

The driver of the black-and-white said, "You look like you oughtta get checked up at Emergency, Mr. Shayne. Want us to drive you there?"

"Thanks — but no thanks." Shayne waved them off and managed to walk across the street, this time without incident. Seated in the parked Buick, he closed his eyes for long minutes and battled an urge to heave up his luncheon,

finally won it.

He was going to hurt in a lot of places for the next few days. With this awareness, cold anger mounted slowly within him and he reviewed his fragmentary impressions of the attempt on his life.

— It was not a professional hit job. Of that, he was certain — for two reasons. One, the method employed had been too risky to bear the stamp of a hired killer by trade. Two, since his involvement in the murder of A.Y. Owen, there had not been sufficient time for a contract to be taken on his life, a hitman hired and set to work.

His impressions were of a grey coupe and a flickering view of a driver wearing dark sunshades. He had not been able to learn the make of the car, much less its license plate numbers. He could not even be sure whether the driver was male or female.

All Shayne was sure of was that somehow, sooner or later, he was going to exact vengeance in full. Now that the shock was fading, He felt increasingly humiliated by the incident. And humility was not a garment the redhead enjoyed wearing.

He considered going to a hospital to have his injuries checked and attended to. He considered returning to the office, where Lucy kept a first aid kit, and letting her patch him up. But the redhead did neither — he didn't want anyone else to see him in his

current delapidated condition.

Instead, he returned home, parked in the basement garage and took the elevator to his own floor, sight unseen.

There, he stripped — his suit and shirt were past hope of salvage — went to the bathroom and checked himself out. His injuries, while painful, were less serious than he had feared. In a warm shower, he cleansed the scrapes on his knees and left elbow and, emerging, considered taping his sore ribs, decided against it as limiting his mobility.

Still nude, he visited his small kitchen and poured himself a tumbler full of cognac and ice, sat on the sofa and slowly drank it. While he drank, he considered the case that had so suddenly erupted.

It was the speed with which action had arrived that seemed to him to be vital. Who could have triggered it so quickly?

Jason Jones had already made his pitch and come to terms — and, even if his sincerity was a false facade, would not have set up this type of operation. The broom handle, perhaps a boathook, were more his style.

Who else?

He dismissed his client at once. Laura Owen would hardly have hired him to have him rubbed out. If nothing else, the size of her retainer check ruled that out. Not did "Larruping Lo" impress him as exactly a subtle type — not that he doubted her toughness in

strictly feminine infighting. He wondered just how she had "fixed" Ruthanne Reilly's "wagon."

Then he had talked to Sam Diener, to Andy Whiting, to T.O. Agronsky, the labor organizer — and missed talking to Ruthanne, The remaining suspects so far — Dana Holding Owen and her alleged lover, Lou Allen — he had yet to see. Nor did he, as yet, know even the identity of T.O.'s companion on the late A.J. Owen's yacht.

Had Diener put him on the spot? Also unlikely, and Andy Whiting was Diener's man. Agronsky? Shayne's personal jury was still out on that. Than who . . . ?

The telephone on the coffee table in front of him rang. It was Len Sturgis.

"You okay, Mike?" he said. "I hear you've been plowing up good Miami pavement with your face."

"Don't count your cookies, Len — I'll live. Anything new?"

"It's too early," the chief of detectives replied. "I'm more concerned with what happened to you."

"So am I." The redhead tugged at his left earlobe. "But you didn't call me for a health checkup, Len. What's cooking?"

"I hear you got a client, Mike. I also hear you won Jason Jones over the hard way."

"You been talking to him



again?"

"Right," said Sturgis. "The way he talked, I think he's falling in love with you."

"Shut up, Len," said the redhead.

"Okay, Mike." Sturgis sounded as if he was chuckling. Then, more serious, "Since you're on the case, keep us up to date. That's all." You got anything?"

"Look for somebody with a grey convertible, that's all. Make and license number unknown. Somebody damn near took me out with one just now, outside the Gold Doubloon."

"Will do," said Sturgis. "That all?" He sounded disappointed as he hung up.

Shayne fired a cigaret, took another pull at his drink. If nothing else, Len Sturgis' call indicated that the police had not

yet come up with anything significant in the poison murder of A.Y. Owen. The call had been an overt fishing expedition.

Mike Shayne called the office to tell Lucy he would not be back that afternoon — it was already after four o'clock. She promised to close up, reported nothing interesting had occurred since his departure.

"This job is getting too dull," she complained. "I'm going to have to start looking for something more exciting in the Help Wanted ads."

"Hang in there, Angel. I'll try to think of something."

He hung up with a sense of relief. If Lucy had somehow learned of his "accident", the proverbial wild horses could not have kept her away, and just then the redhead was in no mood to be mothered. Not even by a woman as loving as Lucy.

He concentrated once more on trying to figure out who had come so close to killing him earlier that afternoon.

The phone rang again. It was Lo Owen.

She said, "Shayne, I want you to escort me to a small gathering. Pick me up in just one hour."

He said, "Lo, I don't run an escort service. I'm not the pink tea type."

"This," she told him, "is a business gathering. I want you there with me."

"For protection?"

"It's possible. Be at my home at a quarter of six."

VIII

AS A MEMBER of one of the longer established echelons of great Miami wealth, A.Y. Owen had built his mansion well before the Bal Harbour development in an exclusive enclave of similar luxury dwellings close to the beach above Coral Gables. A curved crushed clamshell driveway wound its way between twin palisades of tall cypresses to an impressive porte cochere that fronted a two-story white stone dwelling with double bow front and a balustraded roof.

When Mike Shayne parked the Buick amongst the other more expensive vehicles in the pyracanthus fringed car area, his companion said, "Impressive, isn't it? I always thought the damned place looked like a mausoleum. And the upkeep! Something is always breaking down. I wouldn't trade my condominium for this if somebody threw in a couple of million."

Shayne said nothing. There was no need. Lo Owen had kept up a gunfire of chatter and comment since the detective picked her up at the entrance to the modern high-rise residential edifice in which the older women had lived during the nine years since her divorce from the meat-packing millionaire.

In the course of her near-monologue, he had learned that the purpose of the gathering was to attempt to thrash out a number of potential problems "before the legal jackals start tearing the guts out of the estate with their damned postponements and sickening legal fees."

"If this is strictly family," Shayne had countered, "why do you need me?"

A snort had been his reply, followed by, "If Dana and Ruthanne don't start scratching each other's eyes out, they may both turn on me. Besides, I want you to take a look at those girls with their guards down."

Three persons were awaiting them in the huge overstuffed living room to which a silent footman in blue and gold hazzard-like uniform conducted them — two women and a man.

Their hostess, Dana Holding Owen, looked familiar to the detective. Although she had retired from stage and screen since her marriage to the late millionaire, Shayne realized at once that he had seen her perform on TV reruns many times over the years.

She was tall, languid, dark-haired, willowy, her voice a series of refined soft bell tones. She greeted Lo with a sad half-smile and said, "My dear, how nice of you to come! How very thoughtful of you."

"Sweetie," said Lo in her

Gravel Gertie growl, "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. Hello Ruthanne — you, too, Lou. How goes the great world of hernias and slipped discs?"

Lou Allen, sunbronzed and darkly handsome in his royal blue blazer, pale blue ascot and biscuit-hued flared slacks, replied, "Just because I've had some bad luck lately . . ."

Lo ignored him, flipped a hand to indicate the detective and said, "I brought Mike Shayne along. He's looking into Alfred's murder for me." Then, "Hello, Ruthanne, darling. My, you look positively chubby."

Chubby, the detective thought, was not exactly the word to describe the late A.Y. Owen's long-time secretary.

She was broad of beam but not unpleasingly so, since her width was structural, not due to fat. She looked rather like a very attractive bulldog with her dark red hair cut close, her firm opulence of figure hinted at rather than headlined by the grey-green knit suit she wore. Her eyes were a matching grey-green.

To Shayne, Ruthanne looked passionate, efficient — and frightened. Since she did not appear the type to alarm easily, the detective judged she must have been put through the mill before — by Lo, which he knew, perhaps by Dana Holding Owen as well.

The footman brought in a well

equipped tray of drinks, served them and withdrew from the room, closing the door behind him. Through the tall bow windows could be seen a remarkable view of the bay with a huge full moon just beginning to top the low horizon of landscaped keys across a narrow lagoon.

"Okay," said Lo, putting down her glass on a table of inlaid rosewood, "if we're here to cut up A.Y.'s melon, let's screw the fiddle faddle and get at it. But I can tell you right now it won't do any of you a damned bit of good. I know I'm his chief legatee and I'm going to stay that way."

One of Mike Shayne's eyebrows lifted and he ran a thumbnail along the line of his jaw. When his client flung down a gauntlet, she really flung it down, he thought, as he watched the reactions of the other two women.

For a long moment, there were none. They seemed stunned by the older woman's assertiveness.

Then Dana Owen took a deep breath that rendered her already deep bosom even deeper. She said, "Really, darling, we don't want to do you out of anything that is not rightfully yours. We wouldn't be *that* foolish, would we?"

She moved to a piano, draped herself gracefully against it, obviously enjoying the role she was playing. Lifting her head high to reveal the swanlike curve of her slender neck, she added,

"But Clarence Ohmart, my attorney — surely you've heard of *him* — feels that certain small inequities should in all honor be adjusted.

"For instance, Alfred was kind enough to leave this house to me —"

"Only because I wouldn't touch it with a thirteen-foot pole!" interrupted Lo.

" — but he has not bequeathed anything like sufficient funds to maintain it in proper fashion. You know that. We've all read the will." Dana ignored the interruption. "Clarence believes it would save all of us a great deal of time, trouble and expense if we could adjudicate these inequities in advance of probate, thereby avoiding inevitable judicial action. Ruthanne agrees with me, don't you, Ruthanne?"

Ruthanne hesitated, shafted a quick, furtive look at Lo Owen, then managed a nod of assent. It was evident to Mike Shayne that the dead man's long-time secretary was thoroughly cowed by both of the other women. But, in her flare of nostril, in the rise and fall of her bosom, the detective sensed that something close to fury lay beneath her silence.

"*You* agree with *Dana*, Ruthanne?" The question dripped sarcasm. The auburn haired woman half-shrugged and Shayne's client, said, "Isn't this something new — agreeing with *Dana*? I seem to recall a

time when you two were at each other's throats."

"That's water under the bridge," Dana Holding Owen hastily put in. "Ruthanne and I see eye to eye on many things, Lo, darling. But this doesn't answer my question. I don't wish to sound difficult, Lo, but I can make things look very unpleasant for you if I have to go to court."

"Sue and be damned!" snapped Lo. "I can make it a lot hotter for you in court and you know it. Right, Lou?" A pause while the handsome sportsman blushed beneath his even tan, then Shayne's client added, "As for the house, it's yours and that's that. Sell it — in today's real estate market it should bring in enough cash to keep even Lou in polo ponies or whatever. As far as I'm concerned, you can give the God damn thing away."

She rose, said, "Come on, Shayne," walked out of the huge living room without a backward glance.

Barely managing to keep a straight face, the detective followed her. He understood all too well now why people called her Larruping Lo. When she threw a punch, it was a knockout.

The detective drove her back to the condominium in which Lo maintained her apartment. She said nothing during the ride and spoke only after he braked the Buick under a carpeted port cochere.

Then, "Didn't mean to blow my stack back there, but the sight of those two bitches who cut me out with Alfred made my kettle boil over. Come on up for a drink. I owe you for dragging you into that little scene."

What the detective had seen of the second Mrs. Owen's home looked strictly interior decorated — every piece of furniture in harmony with every other. Lo Owen's twentieth story apartment, while comfortable enough, was strictly Laura Owen, bearing her unmistakable stamp.

A three-foot model of the *Jack Tar III* topped a large bookshelf crammed with a Britannica, lurid paperbacks, a full set of Trollope's novels and a wicker sewing basket drooling many colored loops of thread and yarn. The tabletops were cluttered — but with interesting clutter. A wild melange of potted plants made a jungle of the terrace beyond the French windows.

She mixed the drinks adroitly, sat opposite him across a glass-topped coffee table, lit a cigaret, said, "Who do you think killed Alfred, Shayne? How about Lou Allen for openers?"

IX

SHAYNE TUGGED at his left earlobe, said, "Could be, I suppose. He was aboard the yacht when your husband went overboard. But, poison?"

"I know. It's probably wishful thinking on my part. He's such a God damned gigolo-type."

"How come your ex stood for him? He didn't strike me as exactly a type to let himself be milked by his wife for another man."

"Take it from me — he wasn't," said Lo. "But Lou and Dana played it smart. And I made the mistake of trying to warn him."

"Oh-oh!"

Lo drained her glass, put it back in its coaster so hard that the detective's drink jumped. She said, "Sometimes I'm so damn stupid I could choke. How about Dana?"

"A better possibility," Shayne replied. "She struck me as being tougher than your front."

"It's not all front," Lo Owen growled, then sighed, added, "But you're right, Shayne. Nobody could be as tough as I act sometimes."

"Lo . . ."

"Yes, Mike."

"Back in my office, you said your ex said something about S.W. Diener to the effect that, 'those boys had better get off my back or I'll get on theirs.' Also that he said he knew 'just how to do it.' Could you enlarge on that?"

"It would have to be guesswork. Alfred didn't elaborate."

"A little good guesswork won't hurt at this phase," the detective reminded her.

Lo Owen frowned, then said, "Well, if it were anyone but 'Snow White' Diener, I'd say it would be a feeler — like, 'We'll go easy on your operation in this expose if . . .' " She let it hang.

"Have you heard of Diener operating that way, Lo? Any rumors, any whispers?"

"No, Mike." She shook her dyed gold head. "But why would I hear? Why should anyone hear?" She paused, added, "But why if such an offer were made, and Alfred could prove it . . ." Again, she let it hang.

"I see." Shayne nodded, then said, "If it were true, why in hell didn't he tell me there on the yacht? I'd have taken his case if he had."

"Maybe Alfred didn't have proof, Mike. Maybe he still had to get it. One thing about my ex — he always played them close to his vest."

The redhead nodded, got to his feet, said, "Thanks for the drink, Lo."

"You're leaving?" She, too, rose.

"Got to get back to work," said Shayne. "So far, we've got nothing but a mass of loose ends."

She squinted at him, her head cocked, said, "What happened to your face, Mike?"

"Somebody tried to kill me this afternoon."

Her dark eyes lit up. She said, "You're onto something!"

"If I am, I'd give a lot to know what it is."

"Then somebody *thinks* you're onto something."

Shayne nodded, said, "Know anybody that's involved who drives a grey convertible?"

She looked thoughtful, then shook her head again. Shayne got out of there. The condominium was not far from the marina, so he drove over wishing to talk to Jason. But the *Jack Tar III* was dark, its tender moored to the pier. A security officer told Shayne that Jason had come ashore about an hour ago.

"Did he leave a message?"

"What's your name?"

Mike Shayne identified himself and the officer nodded, said, "He told me to tell you if you called or showed that he had decided to follow a lead, that he'd be back by midnight." A pause, then, "Say, you working on the murder?" And, when Shayne nodded, "I hope you get the bastard. A.Y. Owen was well liked around here."

Shayne went to a pay telephone, dialled the A.Y. Owen home number. A voice he recognized as that of the blue-and-gold footman of the afternoon informed him that no one was home. The detective cursed under his breath, glanced at his wristwatch. It was close to eight o'clock and his ribs ached like hell.

He looked up Ruthanne Reilly's number in the book, found it,



began to dial it, then halted. He wanted very much to talk to the dead man's secretary. Since she was no longer at the Owen mansion, there was a fair chance of her being home. He opened the phone book again, checked the address.

Mz Reilly lived in a palm lined neighborhood of modest homes and two-story apartment buildings. Her listed street number fronted what looked like a four-family dwelling, two apartments to a story. Two of the apartments were dark as the detective pulled to the curb across the street, the others lighted, one upstairs, one down.

Shayne lit a cigaret, considering his approach to the dead man's secretary. From somewhere, stereo music filled the air with a soft lilting ballad of love. It had been, the redhead realized, a long day and a hard one. Briefly he

let himself drift, before taking a deep breath and pulling himself out of it for whatever still lay ahead.

The illusion of peace was shattered by a woman's sudden cry of, "Don't! For Gods sake, no...."

Two silenced shots sounded, soft and lethal in the night, and the woman was silent. A door slammed, footsteps followed, then the sound of a car motor abruptly fired to life.

Grimly sure of what had happened, Mike Shayne pressed on his starter and pulled the Colt .45 from his shoulder rig. He was facing west, having driven from the marina, decided his best move was to use the Buick to block any escape from the driveway beside the small apartment building, a driveway he assumed led to a garage in back.

But there was not time. The detective had barely got the Buick moving diagonally across the street when a car burst out of the shadowed driveway, headed straight for the redhead's veteran vehicle.

Then, at the last possible second, the driver spun his wheels left, missed by a mere inch sideswiping Shayne in a shriek of rubber, blitzed away to a roar of power. The whole incident, from the girl's cry to the driver's evasive action, lasted no more than seven seconds.

In the instant the two cars

were alongside, the redhead did manage to get in two shots, hoping to hit the driver since there was no way he could inflict vital damage on the car while it was that close to his.

The Buick bucked and stalled and all Shayne could do at the moment was to sit there, watching whoever it was escape through the rearview mirror. At the corner behind him, the careening vehicle spun sharply right in a second screech of tormented rubber, then disappeared.

Not a hope of so much as nailing the license number — but as it vanished in full profile, the detective saw by the dim glow of a street light that it was a grey convertible.

The redhead got his car going again, pulled to the curb and got out to run to the house, his just-fired automatic still at the ready. The red front door of the building with its bright brass trim was unlocked. Shayne flung himself through it, found that he was in a hallway with a staircase leading to the second floor.

At the head of the stairs, a young woman in green shorts and halter was aiming both barrels of a shotgun directly at his chest. In a deep Southern drawl, she said, "Stop right where you are, mister, and drop that gun."

Since the girl had the drop on him and it would be impossible for her to miss, the redhead

dropped his big Colt to the carpet and lifted his hands shoulder high.

"Better call the police, miss," he said.

"I already have. We're going to wait right here, you and I, till they get here." She moved halfway down the staircase as she spoke but the twin muzzles she cradled did not waver.

The two patrolmen from the nearest squad car were the first to answer the call, coming in through the open front door with riot gun and Magnum respectively at the ready. They stopped short at the tableau in front of them.

"This the man, miss?" one of them asked.

"I don't know — but he came busting in right after the shooting, waving *that*." She gestured with her shotgun toward Shayne's .45 lying on the carpeted tile floor.

"Okay fellow, Don't try anything foolish. Get over to the wall."

Shayne was forced to push against the wall with his hands above his head while he was expertly if ignominiously frisked. He knew better than to protest the truth at this stage of affairs. Apparently the Mike Shayne I.D. he carried meant nothing to either of them or to the girl on the stairs.

Not until the backup crew arrived, headed by Homicide Detective Sergeant Harlan Byrd

was the redhead able to extricate himself from his dilemma.

"Jesus, Shayne, you *do* get into the damnedest . . ." Byrd let it tail off, said, "Mind telling me what this is all about. We got a call about a shooting in the building, two others about a shooting outside."

"Better look in there." Mike Shayne nodded toward Ruthanne Reilly's apartment, whose door was unlocked. He was hideously certain as to the nature of what they would find behind it.

He was right, of course — and wished to hell he hadn't been. Ruthanne Reilly lay sprawled on her face on the carpet of her comfortably furnished living room, in a spreading pool of crimson.

X

IT WAS CLOSE to midnight when Mike Shayne was allowed to leave Ruthanne Reilly's apartment. He was bone-tired and hurt all over, but his adrenals were pumping and there was no question of his returning home and giving his aching ribs the rest they were demanding.

There was a killer loose, the police as yet had no clue to his identity — and the redhead had been hired to run him to earth.

Lighting a cigaret, he sat behind the wheel of his car, still parked across the street from the murdered secretary's home and considered his next move. He

wondered what Jason was up to lifted the radio telephone from its special cradle beneath the dashboard and asked information for the number of the marina.

Jason Jones was not aboard the *Jack Tar III*. At least, he did not answer the phone.

He dialled his client, Laura "Lo" Owen. She did answer, said, "Shayne? What's this all about?"

When he told her Ruthanne Reilly had been murdered, she growled, "Jesus! The poor stupid broad — I may have had good reason to hate her guts, but I never wished *that* on her. If I did, I held it to wishing."

"Nobody suspects you," Shayne told her. "What I'm really after is Lou Allen's address."

"You want to talk to that creep? What for?"

"I want to ask him a question."

"Ask me — maybe I've got the answer."

"I doubt it, Lo."

"Ask me anyway."

"Who was Ruthanne's male companion on the *Jack Tar III* the afternoon your ex took his dive?"

"You're right. I haven't the faintest idea. Why Lou Allen, though?"

Shayne said, "He was there."

"So were a lot of other people — Jason, Dana, T.O. Agron-sky . . ."

"Jason can't be reached," the redhead told her. "Dana

isn't answering her phone and I'm quite sure Agronsky is drunk. He told me he was going to get smashed this afternoon."

"Okay, okay." Lo Owen spoke in a pussycat's scratchy purr. "Hold on Shayne. I'll get it for you." He's in the *Social Register*."

She was a good as her word. Lou Allen lived in what had been the gardener's cottage of his family's long lost estate, not far from A.Y. Owen's massive mansion. Also, he answered the unlisted telephone number Lo gave the detective.

"Okay, okay." The sportsman's voice was slightly slurred. "Come on over, Shayne — though I don't know what in the hell I can tell you. Know the way?"

He received the redhead wearing only a pair of blue trimmed white Bermudas. Somewhat to Shayne's surprise, his torso was tough-muscled and liberally decorated with scars.

Noting the detective's regard, he shrugged and said, "It goes with the game."

"What game?"

"Taking the jumps — steeple-chase riding. Had to give it up for good last year — doctor's orders. Have a drink?"

"Thanks. I could use one." As the sportsman poured him a cognac from a well stocked portable bar, Shayne told him of Ruthanne Reilly's murder.

"Christ, Shayne! What's going

on?" His hand shook as he handed the detective a large cognac on the rocks.

"That," Shayne told him, "is what I hope you can help me find out."

"Me?" Allen sat down with a thump that spilled some of his drink on his bare torso. "Son of a bitch, but that's cold!" He mopped it up with the heel of his free hand. Then, "Lord, Shayne, you don't think I know who's doing this. If I did, I'd have called the police this morning."

He looked suddenly sobered, shocked, bloodshot of eye, muttered, "My God — Ruthanne!"

"You knew her well?"

"Not very — not in a Biblical sense anyway. But coming on top of A.Y.'s murder — if it was a murder . . ."

"It was." The redhead spoke firmly.

"Yes, I suppose it was . . . now." Allen sighed, shuddered, took a deep breath, said, "How can I help, Shayne?"

"All I'm after right now is the name of the man Ruthanne had with her on that last yachting party he threw."

"Jesus . . ." Allen's brows knotted. "That's a tough one. I never saw the bastard before in my life, and I have a hell of a time with names if they're not written down or in print. Let's see . . ."

He closed his eyes for a few



seconds, then said, "He was a big fellow — built like a brick out-house. Oh-oh! I remember Ruthanne calling him Whitey. The reason I remember it is he had dark hair and eyes. He seemed okay — didn't say much."

Another pause, then, "Does that help?"

"Maybe." The detective shrugged, said, "What about T.O. Agronsky? Do you recall where he was when Owen went overboard?"

A half smile, a nod, then, "I remember that okay — I had to go to the head right about when it happened and T.O. had the door locked. He was seasick all afternoon, so we had to use the crew's john most of the time."

"It doesn't sound like a hilarious afternoon," said the detective.

"It wasn't. I couldn't figure out why A.Y. put it together. But he did, and asked Dana, and Dana wanted me to go, so . . ." A sigh, a headshake, then, "Poor Ruthanne. She may have been a bitch on wheels, but that's no reason for murder."

"You might be surprised." Shayne put down his empty glass and got to his feet. Lou Allen did not get up, so the detective let himself out of the little jewelbox of a house somebody had fixed up for the sportsman. He wondered who. Dana, probably, he decided as he walked slowly to his Buick, pondering what Lou Allen had told him.

According to Shayne's client, Allen had been her successor's lover before Dana Holding's marriage to the late meat packer. It was not too difficult to understand his success with women. If no longer wealthy, Allen radiated the ambience of the well-born. He was handsome, virile, held the glamour of horsemanship that is so appealing to many females.

Before driving away, Shayne glanced at the small garage set a few yards from the cottage. It was strictly a one-car affair, and that car was a sapphire-blue Simca Triumph of ancient vintage, not even close to the pearl-grey convertable the detective had twice glimpsed so briefly.

He tugged at his left earlobe after getting back into the Buick.

If Allen had told the truth, T.O. Agronsky *had* been out of commission with seasickness when Alfred Y. Owen was pushed overboard. Nor did it seem likely that any of the women aboard had done it. Ruthanne was out of suspicion the hard way — and, recalling A.Y.'s massive physique, the redhead doubted any of them *could* have given him the near-fatal shove.

The number of suspects was narrowing, the pattern of the case beginning to form in Mike Shayne's mind. He had all the leads now that had been so lamentably lacking before . . . everything but the name and face of the murderer.

But even when he had those, it was going to be one hell of a job to hang the rap on him. With both A.Y. and Ruthanne out of the way, there was nobody left to bring a capital charge against him.

If, of course — if Lou Allen had told the truth. On the whole, the detective felt that he had. His shock on learning of Ruthanne's murder had been real — unless Allen was the world's greatest actor, something the redhead very much doubted.

As he drove back into the city, Mike Shayne pondered his next move. While halted for a red light, he glanced at his wristwatch. The time was well after one a.m. Shayne doubted the killer would strike again that night . . .

XI

SHAYNE WAS IN THE ACT of unstrapping his shoulder holster when the telephone rang. He picked it up, expecting the caller to be either Len Sturgis, Tim Rourke or his client. It was Rourke, and he sounded angry and a little drunk. Neither condition was unusual for the reporter at this hour of the night.

"You rat, Shayne," he said. "What's the idea of hanging me up in The Beef House all night without even calling?"

"Sorry, Tim" said the redhead. "I've been busy."

"I know. The Reilly killing just came over the late, late TV news. And guess what? The *Herald* got the beat, you crumb."

"How in hell could I hold a thing like that for you and your beloved *News?*" the redhead countered, feeling his own neck growing hot. "I've been tied up with the cops."

"Come on, Mike! You always managed to get through to me before. How come you hung us up this time?"

"There was no way, Tim."

"In a pig's eye!"

Shayne took a deep breath and held his temper. He was about to say, "How about it I give you the name of the murderer?" When the operator cut in with, "I have an emergency call for Michael Shayne. Will you accept it?"

"Okay." At the moment, the redhead was glad to be rid of his furious friend. "Put it on."

"Shayne?" The voice that came on was not exactly the one he expected. It belonged to S.W. "Snow White" Diener. Assured of whom he was talking to, the industrial cleanup man said, "Can you get over to the hotel right away?"

"I guess so."

"I'll expect you. There has been a development I feel you should know about."

"Okay. I'm on my way."

"I'm in penthouse C, top floor." Diener hung up.

Shayne did likewise, aching all over as he retightened the straps of his shoulder rig and reached for his jacket on the back of the sofa. The phone began to ring again as he went toward the door. Shayne did not even bother to answer it.

Let Tim stew in his own high-proof juice for a bit, he thought. If whatever had developed at Diener's end of the case was important enough for him to ring Mike Shayne at one-plus a.m., it promised to be vitally urgent.

He took off from the basement parking garage like a four-wheeled bullet . . .

The door to penthouse C of the Ponce was ajar. Diener's voice called, "Come on in, Shayne, in response to the detective's knock. Shayne heeled it shut behind him.

Diener was seated behind a

document-strewn desk at the far end of a large carpeted living room furnished with overstuffed upholstery and black walnut veneer. He looked far more tired than he had that afternoon and wore no jacket over his light blue turtleneck. He did not rise as Shayne entered but remained with his hands locked upon the desk blotter.

"Sit down, Shayne." Diener nodded toward an armchair some ten feet from the desk. The drawn curtains on the industrial investigator's right stirred slightly and the redhead judged that a french window behind them was open, probably leading to a terrace beyond.

"What's up?" the detective asked.

"How far has your investigation into A. Y. Owen's death developed?" he asked.

"Let's hear your 'development' first," Shayne countered. "You sounded urgent over the phone."

"This afternoon, you suggested a possible tie-in between Owen's death and my organization," Diener replied. He paused, shuddered briefly, then added, "At the time, I denied the existence of any possible connection." He paused again and his light blue eyes lifted to meet the detective's.

Mike Shayne picked up the ball. "Since then, I take it, you have found such a connection," he said.

Diener took a deep breath, then nodded. "Unfortunately, I have.

Which is why I called you. But before I reveal what I have discovered, I should like to know if you have uncovered any connection from your end."

He spoke slowly, almost as if he were reciting a prepared speech. Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. It was definitely not the sort of greeting he had expected. He tried to recall whether Diener had given the impression of being rehearsed during their earlier meeting. If he had, the redhead had not recorded it.

"Yes, Shayne?" He felt that Diener was prodding him.

Why? The detective wondered, then decided to take the plunge.

"My job," he said, "is to collect information, not to reveal it except to my client — or to the police if that is necessary. But the answer is definitely yes. And I think you should know that, since my visit to your office, Owen's secretary, Ruthanne Reilly, has been murdered and two attempts have been made upon my life."

"I had no idea." Diener's face showed shock. "I'm sorry. And you connect these — crimes — with my organization?"

Mike Shayne nodded. "I see no other possibility," he replied. "Owen revealed to his ex-wife shortly before he was poisoned that he was being squeezed by someone connected with your outfit and that he knew exactly how to deal with it. I believe

he did try to deal with it and for that reason was murdered."

The detective paused to grimace with pain and to caress his sore left ribs with the flat of his right hand.

Diener said, "Are you in pain?"

"It's nothing serious," the redhead replied. "Just a small memento of my first encounter with this killer."

"You say Owen's secretary has been killed? Do you know the why of that?"

Again Shayne nodded, said, "I can make a very educated guess. I believe Reilly had been reached by this man. She was in love with her boss and lost out to his second wife after breaking up his first marriage. I believe she gave your man information about the Florida South Packing Company that enabled him to put on the squeeze to lay off Owen's firm in your upcoming telecast. What's more, I believe Owen found her out and told her so."

He paused again to rub his ribs, added, "Isn't that close to the development you mentioned over the phone?"

"Are you sure you don't need medical attention?" Diener asked, frowning anxiously.

"Isn't it?" the detective pressed.

Diener slowly nodded, sighed, then said, "It's so close it's no matter. I couldn't believe a member of my own organization



would do such a thing — a man in whom I had absolute confidence. I've been a blind damn fool. God only knows how many times it has happened before. My own people!"

Mike Shayne winced and reached for his ribs again, this time sliding his right hand inside his jacket as if to get closer to his aching side — but, instead gripped the butt of the heavy

Colt .45 holstered there.

In his previous winces, Shayne had allowed his eyes to leave Diener's face and study the drapes to his left, Diener's right. He had noted that the stirrings in the heavy velour curtains were localized vertically and therefore almost certainly caused by some other agency than a breeze, something about the height and width of a man.

Diener's behavior, too, had been strange — his leaving the penthouse door open, his not rising when the detective entered, his insistence upon Shayne doing the talking, his rehearsed speech. Finally, during their conversation, Diener's eyes had at one time or another covered the rest of the room — all but that part of it that was draped with curtains.

It added up to one total in the detective's mind. The industrial investigator was sitting under a gun — and the gun was held by a person standing behind the drapes on the balcony beyond.

This was why the redhead had prepared for action by appearing to be suffering. It paved the way for him to clear his own gun of its holster.

As he drew the Colt, Mike Shayne shouted, "*Drop, Diener!*" and flung himself over the arm of his chair to put it between himself and the unseen third person present.

XII

USING THE MOMENTUM of his fall to the carpet, although the jolt of contact with the floor made his sore ribs hurt badly, Mike Shayne emerged on his belly and elbows on the opposite side of the arm-chair back, with a clear angle-view of the drapes — just as they were parted violently by the big dark-haired young man who came through them, pistol in hand, and fired two shots that whistled through the exact place where Shayne's body had been to thud into the baseboard on the far wall.

Shayne fired but one shot. The .45-caliber slug ripped into Andy Whiting's right shoulder and all but tore the arm from his body. The field manager uttered a single half-strangled shriek as the pistol fell from his hand and he crashed backward into the wall, then fell to the carpet with his wound spouting blood, unconscious.

Mike Shayne scrambled to his feet. He whirled as another crash, a splintering crash, sounded from the corridor behind him and the door burst open to let a single tall young man erupt inward.

Jason Jones, brandishing a small boathook, skidded to a stop as he took in the scene, looked at the felled killer and said, "We'd better put a tourniquet on that arm before he bleeds

to death."

Sam Diener, who had dropped to the carpet at Shayne's call, rose and reached for the phone on his desk as the redhead holstered his gun. Jason bent to retrieve the Killer's pistol, a Remington .38, but Shayne stopped him, saying, "Better leave it alone, Jason. The police will want that one. Ten to one, it's the gun that killed Ruthanne Reilly."

The hotel physician was first on the scene and managed to staunch the flow of blood barely in time before the ambulance men arrived to cart Whiting away on a gurney. The police were right behind them with a sleepy looking Len Sturgis himself in charge.

"I thought you were going to keep me informed, Mike," he said. "How'd you get onto him?"

"I didn't until Lou Allen identified him as Reilly's companion on A.Y. Owen's yachting party. His description and the fact Reilly called him 'Whitey' were enough. I just got home when I put it together and then Diener's call came. Sorry about not letting you know, Len."

"You shaved it too damn close," the chief of detectives grumbled, but there was a glint of admiration in his large dark eyes. "Someone could have been killed."

"Someone was," the redhead replied. "Two someones."

By the time the police were finally gone and all questions

were answered to their satisfaction, it was close to dawn.

Diener moved into another penthouse suite and ordered a steak, eggs and bacon breakfast sent up by room service. He got out a bottle of bourbon and then, with a, "Damn, I forgot about you, Shayne," ordered up a fifth of Martell. All three were exhausted and the redhead's ribs were still hurting. But they were too keyed up for sleep.

After the drinks had been poured, Shayne took a hearty pull at his tall glass, lit a cigaret and said. "Jason, how the hell did you get onto Whiting?"

"I got together with Alfonzo our cook — he was on the yacht, remember? — and we figured out it had to be Ruthanne's companion that afternoon who pushed A.Y. overboard. Alfonzo had seen him slip out on deck just behind A.Y. Then, when he heard about Ruthanne's murder, we got sure. Alfonzo overheard him talking about working for Mr. Diener and remembered the 'Whitey' bit. So we called the Diener office and there was a night girl on the switchboard."

"I have to keep open twenty-four hours," Diener put in.

Jason nodded, said, "I asked for Whitey and she said, Mr. Whiting? I'll see if he's in." He wasn't, so I hung up.

"Why didn't you call me?" Shayne asked him.

"I tried to, Mr. Shayne, but you

didn't answer. So I drove over to your apartment house just in time to see you heading out of the garage in a hurry. I followed you here."

"Any time you want a job as a private detective, I'll recommend you to one of the good agencies," Shayne told him.

"Thanks, but I'll stick to boats," Jason replied. "I've been offered a lot of jobs as a yacht skipper. But I turned them down to stick with A.Y."

"You'll be okay then." Diener

smiled a rare smile. Like everyone else, he seemed impressed by the young man's simple integrity.

They were just finishing their steaks, which were excellently broiled, when Mike Shayne thumped his forehead with the heel of a hand and said, "My God, I forgot." Then, reaching for the phone, he added, "My old buddy Rourke hates to be waked up this early. But he'll be a lot sorer if I don't call him."

With a muscular forefinger, the redhead began punching out the numbers . . .



**Read: in the MARCH issue of
your favorite crime magazine —**

SEVEN TO DIE

**A New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel
by BRETT HALLIDAY**

Once there were seven old men — then, suddenly, there were but five, with the last survivor due to inherit a \$3,000,000 "last man" bequest. The five living heirs gathered in Miami to discuss the situation — and soon found each of them was terrified of the others. So they called in Mike Shayne, who quickly discovered that he had stepped into a hornets' nest.

The Happy Pigeon

The game was set up to relieve Mr. Rivers of his money. But this pigeon developed dragon's teeth!

by

GEORGE ANTONICH

THE POKER GAME WAS rigged, but good! Mister A.C. Rivers was The Pigeon. White-haired, mid-sixtyish and retired from Investments, he was the happiest pigeon I'd ever seen. He kept me busy serving drinks and had me giggling at his jokes, mostly on himself and his "pesky" run of bad luck. I mean, nothing seemed to faze him.

Until that one hand.

It was Speedy Gonzalez' deal. Speedy and Big John and Earl were all shilling for Morris Morrell. Morrie owned the bowling alley and was their boss and co-player. All four, staked and led by Morrell, had their sights on Mister Rivers' fat bankroll.

Speedy Gonzales picked up the deck. "Draw poker," he announced. "Jacks or better to open."

Everybody passed and it was up to Speedy. He opened for ten dol-



lars. Nobody dropped out. After the draw, Speedy bet another ten dollars. Big John folded. Mister Rivers stayed. Earl dropped out and Morrie Morrell raised fifty

dollars. It was up to Speedy to meet the raise or drop out. His thick lips trembled briefly, then he threw down his cards. "I'll leave it up to the gamblers."

"I didn't catch that much help," Mister Rivers said, tossing his cards in. "But I would like to see your openers, Mister Gonzales."

Speedy looked like he was going to have a stroke. He showed his hand.

Then Mister Rivers exploded. "You were holding three tens and you didn't stay?" He glared at the others, raking them with his eyes. "Say, it couldn't be that you boys are ganging up on me, could it?"

"Speedy is the cautious type," Morrell said hurriedly. "He gets braver as the game progresses." His mouth was smiling but the burning look he shot at Speedy could have melted a bowling ball.

Mister Rivers grinned suddenly and ordered me to serve another round of drinks. "Sorry I flared up," he said. "Let's get on with the game."

If I'd had a conscience, I would have cringed. It was me who set Mister Rivers up! I'd been tending bar at the bowling alley for a little over two weeks when the old boy hit town. He bought drinks for everyone and tipped me like money was going out of style. It didn't take long for Morrie Morrell to latch onto the action.

Grinning like a fox at an open henhouse, he said to me, "It seems that Mister Rivers has

taken quite a shine to you."

I nodded.

He winked. "I'll make it worth your while to let him know that some of us businessmen are having a little game after closing hours tonight."

So, the deck was stacked. It was me and the four players against poor old Mister Rivers.

After that one show of temper, he settled down and played his cards as they came up. Actually, he was quite a bit ahead of the game when the Big Hand rolled around.

It was Speedy Gonzales' deal again. The fat cook looked like a potbellied Buddha as he shuffled the cards without expression. I had the feeling that, if he wasn't shilling for Morrell, he'd be a tough nut to crack.

Morrie Morrell took a gulp from his drink while Speedy dealt. Then he picked up his cards and fiddled with them for a long moment before fanning them out for me to see over his shoulder.

His first four cards were the Jack, ten, nine, eight of hearts. The last card was the deuce of spades. Morrell's fingers twitched. He had a possible straight flush, open on both ends.

"Bye me," he growled in a sour voice meant to indicate what a lousy hand he was holding. I put a fresh ashtray in front of Big John and looked at his cards. Two pair — aces and trays.

"I'll open for sixty," Big John

said.

"I'll bump that sixty more," Earl said smugly.

Mister Rivers studied the cards buried deep in his cupped hands. I couldn't see what he held. He tossed in his hundred and twenty. "It's mighty kind of you boys," he said, "to build up the pot for me."

Speedy Gonzales' fingers were almost on his money when he caught a glance from Morrell. Abruptly, he threw down his cards.

Morrell said, "I raise that an even hundred." He was out to get back the loot he'd lost. If he caught either end of the straight flush, he could do it all.

Big John and Earl saw the raise and it was up to Mister Rivers. He studied Morrell across the table. With a little laugh he dropped in his hundred. "I can't let you buy this pot," he said. "I've got to keep you honest."

I had a feeling this was going to be the big play of the night. There was over eight hundred in the pot, before the draw!

Morrell was under the gun. He drew one card. He picked it up and sandwiched it in between the other four, face down, waiting to see how many the others drew.

Big John took one card to his two-pair openers. He caught a four, stranding him with aces and trays. Earl called for two cards. I figured him for a pair with a kicker.

Mister Rivers stood pat.

"Check to the raises," Big John said.

"Me, too," Earl echoed.

Mister Rivers swallowed his cards in his left hand while he reached for his money. "It'll cost you gentlemen four hundred," he said evenly.

Morrie Morrell shot me a pleading look. I was behind Rivers, but it was impossible to see his hand. I shrugged helplessly. Morrell fanned out his cards, squeezing each one slowly as if sheer will-power would make them come up right. I took his empty glass and watched him give birth to the queen of hearts. He'd made his straight flush, queen high!

He tossed in his four hundred and bumped the pot four hundred more. One look at his flushed face (no pun intended) caused Earl and Big John to drop out.

Then it was up to Mister Rivers. Morrell snorted impatiently. "Well," he demanded, "are you staying or folding?"

Mister Rivers very carefully counted out four hundred dollars and shoved it onto the growing pile of money. "I'll see your four hundred and raise you —" He stopped, his eyes on the wallet in front of Morrell. "How much can you stand, Mister Morrell?"

The bowling alley boss glared mutely at Mister Rivers for a long minute. The cords in his neck started to swell. He'd figured he had it made. Now he was being challenged. He picked up his wal-

let and counted out the bills.

"One thousand even," he said.

"Then I'll raise you exactly one thousand dollars."

A muscle in Morrell's jaw began to twitch and I could almost taste the hate as he scowled at the old man. He took another long look at the straight flush in his hand. Then, in one swift do-or-die motion, he pushed in his pile of bills.

I whistled softly to myself. Unless I'd lost count along the way, there had to be somewhere near four thousand five hundred dollars in the pot!

There was dead silence in the room for what seemed a lifetime.

Then Morrell screeched, "*I call you, Rivers. Damn it, man, what are you holding?*"

Mister Rivers smiled pleasantly. Every eye was on him now. Morrie Morrell tensed forward, his fists on the table as if poised to leap across it.

Then Mister Rivers spread his cards. "A straight flush in clubs," he announced. "King high."

A sudden cry of despair came out of Morrell's throat, a shrill one, like a bride left waiting at the altar.

Mister Rivers calmly raked in the pot and glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's getting late," he said. "But I do thank you gentlemen for a very rewarding evening."

"Now wait just a damn minute," Morrell growled. "You've got to give me a chance to break even."

Mister Rivers' calm attitude changed then. He leaned across the table until he and Morrell were almost eyeball to eyeball. "I don't got to give you a damn thing," he said.

Morrell pushed back his chair and stood up. "That was a tough hand to lose," he moaned.

Mister Rivers nodded. "That it was."

"It deserves one more play," Morrell whined. "Just you and me. Man to man. Showdown."

"For what stakes? You said you were tapped out."

"Just temporarily! Good God, man, I own this place! The bowling alley, bar, restaurant, the works. My check is good."

Mister Rivers studied him for a long hard moment. "For how much?"

Panic was in Morrell's eyes. I could almost hear the computer of his mind clicking off what would break him even. "Five thousand dollars," he said. "One hand of showdown. Winner takes all. Agreed?"

"It's against my better judgment," Mister Rivers said. "But to give you satisfaction, I agree."

Morrie Morrell snapped his fingers at me. "Bring us a fresh deck."

I did just that.

"If you don't mind," Mister Rivers said. He picked up the deck I'd dropped in front of Morrell. He looked it over very carefully, then broke the seal himself and

spread the cards. When he was satisfied, he said, "We'll cut for deal."

Morrell cut first. He caught an eight spot. Mister Rivers came out with a ten. He scooped up the cards, shuffled, let Morrell cut them, then began dealing.

Morrell's card was an ace. Rivers dealt himself a deuce. Then Morrell caught an eight and Rivers a queen. The third card was another ace for Morrell, a tray for Rivers.

Stopping, Mister Rivers said, "You've got a pair of aces. Would you care to sweeten the pot?"

Morrell studied his foe's cards. A deuce, a queen, and a tray. Short of a minor miracle, he couldn't lose! "How much can you stand?" he asked.

Mister Rivers checked his wallet. "Another five thousand?"

Almost hysterical with joy, Morrell nodded. He tried to laugh, but it came out a shrill falsetto. "Ten thousand it is then," he squealed. "Deal the cards!"

Mister Rivers dealt Morrell a nine. He caught a big ace.

I could see the sweat beads break out on Morrell's forehead. He held aces with a nine high. If Rivers caught another ace he would take the pot with a queen high.

Mister Rivers started to speak. Morrell cut in shrilly. "No more bets. Just deal the damn cards!"

Mister Rivers threw Morrell a ten. I didn't see anything wrong

with his dealing, but as Mister Rivers started to drop his own card Morrell's hand shot out and caught his wrist.

"What kind of crap are you trying to pull?"

Mister Rivers blinked. "I don't understand."

"Like hell you don't," Morrell screeched. "That last card came off the bottom of the deck!"

Mister Rivers sighed deeply, as if putting up with an idiot child. He pulled away from Morrell's grasp and turned over the card in his hand. It was a deuce.

"Now why," he said patiently, "Would I cheat to deal myself a losing hand?"

It took Morrell a time to realize he'd won. He skipped shaky fingers over his wet brow. "I-I'm sorry," he stammered. I-I must be seeing things."

Greed twisted his face then and he reached out to take in the pot. But Mister Rivers' hand shot out to stop him. In Mister Rivers' other fist, suddenly, there was a small automatic, a .25 caliber.

Coldly, he said, "No!"

"What do you mean? I won the pot fair and square."

"That you did," Mister Rivers agreed. "But since you showed such a lack of faith in my integrity, I must do likewise."

His eyes on the automatic, Morrell said, "I don't understand."

"I," Mister Rivers pointed out, "was the only one playing this game with cash. You were tagging

along on speculation."

"My check," Morrell insisted, "is as good as gold!"

"How do I know that? Had you lost this hand, you could easily stop payment on the check. Or — forgive me for suggesting it — you might not have enough funds to cover it."

"That's nonsense," Morrell growled. "Why are you trying to make trouble?"

"I'm not trying to make trouble," Mister Rivers said. "And I am not a welsher. All I want is a fair shake. I want some assurance that you could have paid off had you lost. Is that asking too much?"

Morrell moistened his lips. "What proof do you want?"

"Show me ten thousand dollars — in cash."

A sudden gleam of suspicion filled Morrell's eyes. "What kind of a con are you trying to pull? If I show you ten grand in cash, you and your peashooter take it away from me, right?"

"You show a deplorable lack of faith in your fellow man," Mister Rivers said. "But I believe I have a plan equitable to both of us." He stopped and studied the faces of all of us. His eyes settled on me. "Do you," he asked Morrell, "trust your bartender?"

Morrell nodded, hesitantly.

"Good," Mister Rivers said.

Then, crazily, he scooped up the ten thousand in cash and the check from the table. He handed it all to me.

"What are you doing?" Morrell shrieked.

"I'm trying to prove my sincerity and establish yours. It is now almost three hours until the banks open. At ten o'clock *your* man will go to the bank and cash *your* check. You and I shall remain here, in full view of witnesses, until he arrives with the money you say you have there."

"Why can't you and I go to the bank?" Morrell asked. "It would take only minutes for the teller to assure you. Besides, they might not cash a check that large for my bartender."

"Ah," said Mister Rivers. "Then they might not have cashed it for *me*, had I won! No, Mister Morrell, I think my plan is best. At ten o'clock, you will call the bank and okay the check. In the meantime, you and I can enjoy a leisurely breakfast — together. When your man comes back with the proof I need, I shall bow out and concede the victory to you."

Morrie Morrell was between a rock and a hard place. If he hollered for the law, the after-hours drinking and gambling would be exposed. The loss of his liquor license alone would cost him more than the pot.

Grudgingly, he nodded. "We'll play it your way," he said.

"Mister Rivers looked at me. "On your way then, son. Take yourself a little nap and a shower, but come back here immediately after you cash the check. Is that

understood?"

I nodded and left. I was too excited to take a nap, but I did shower. At ten-fifteen I went to the bank and cashed the check. No problems. At ten-thirty I drove back to the bowling alley as Mister Rivers had instructed me. I did not, however, park the car. Instead, I drove to the rear of the building, where Mister Rivers was in the painful process of forcing his large frame from a restroom window.

"Did you get the money?" he asked.

I nodded and handed him the envelope containing twenty thousand in cash. Then I burned rubber. Once on the freeway I turned to Mister Rivers. "Where to now, Pop?"

"Bakersfield," he said, loosening his tie. "Gloria has another poker-playing bar owner lined up for us." He took a cigar from his inner pocket. With the flame that erupted from the .25 caliber automatic, he lit the cigar and leaned back.

It did my heart good to see him looking so happy.



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The Press

by STEVE KNICKMEYER

Guarding the wedding silver looked like a snap job to Cranmer — until it turned into a set-up with the investigator and his aide as pigeons.

"IT WAS BEAUTIFUL," Maneri told Cranmer. "This mark saunters in decked out like someone from *Happy Days*, I swear to God. Black jacket with silver zippers. He had the dry look, though."

Cranmer sighed, shifted his feet from desk top to floor, said, "Make a long story short, Butch," and limped into the bathroom adjoining his office.

"Come on, Steve," said Maneri. "I've been trying for years to convince you that gambling — hustling anyway — is like sex. The fun's in the chase, not the kill."

In the bathroom, Cranmer re-

moved two round yellow tablets from a large medicine bottle, filled a Dixie cup with water and washed down the pills. He limped back into his office, leaning heavily on the cane in his left hand. Seated, he sneered at Maneri and said, "So you kill your women, huh."

"Only with ecstasy, dad. But this clown at The Ikhnaton really thought he was cool. I played him like a trout . . ."

"How much did you win?" Cranmer interrupted sourly.

The youngster with the flaming red beard and long curly red hair, which made him resemble a giant



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Brillo pad, gave a resigned shrug and muttered, "Six hundred."

"Way to fire," said Cranmer with false enthusiasm. "I suppose . . ."

The door to Cranmer's office opened and his secretary, Cindy Dawson, entered. Her figure was ideal, her features fine, and her translucent black eyes reflected, strangely, the joy of three escapes from the bonds of matrimony.

"You have clients," she announced. "They seem prosperous."

"Terrific." Cranmer scowled. The Demerol tablets he'd taken were beginning to ease the pain in his right knee — victim of a mercury-tipped explosive bullet in Japan a number of years ago — and give him that good-to-be-alive feeling, a feeling which came to him rarely enough. His nose was itching, a sure sign the drug was working.

"Well, hell," he said. "Zip them on in."

Cindy returned in a moment with a man and a woman, introduced them as Brooks Lassiter and his daughter, Nicole, then went back to her outer cubicle, where she spent the majority of her time reading Gothic novels.

Two leather chairs fronted Cranmer's enormous mahogany desk. Without removing his feet from the desk top Cranmer motioned to the chairs and said, "Sit." His voice reflected little politeness and less enthusiasm.

Maneri remained on the avocado, crushed-velvet couch by the wall and assessed the potential clients. Brooks Lassiter might be the one with the money, but it was the daughter who attracted the redhead's attention. Although she wore one of the new mid-length dresses, which he despised, she revealed enough leg in a sitting position to make him lay odds that the higher the legs, the better.

Her plaintive grey eyes beneath the shoulder-length blonde hair were her greatest asset, Maneri decided. She seemed to possess the combined elegance and innocence of the transformed Eliza Doolittle.

Lassiter wore an elderly, obviously hand-tailored blue suit with a white, crisply starched shirt and a slender blue tie bearing white figures which might have been stylish a couple of decades ago. Maneri assumed he wasted no money on clothes — leaving the responsibility for sartorial resplendence in the family to his daughter.

Lassiter wasn't a large man, but solid, and he gave the impression of a German shepherd poised to attack. A tough foe across a conference table, Maneri decided.

Cranmer, seeming almost comatose, scratched his nose. "Well?" he said. "It's your move. Tell me what brings you to my parlor."

Lassiter cocked shaggy eyebrows. Nicole smiled demurely. Toothpaste-ad teeth, Maneri

noticed.

"Cook told me you were surly, impatient, but efficient," Lassiter said in a tenor voice which conflicted with his aggressive posture and demeanor. "You've certainly confirmed his judgment on the first two points."

Cranmer grunted vaguely, raised his eyes to the ceiling and watched the shifting patterns. He'd steered Cook away from a phony bankruptcy scheme a year or so ago.

"You're a fount of information," he told Lassiter. "You want to hire me for something or palaver all day?"

Maneri restrained a chuckle. He knew Cranmer hated work and he'd seen him chase several potential clients with his purposely offensive approach. But Lassiter remained unruffled.

"I want to employ you," he said, "as a guard. My daughter is being married Friday night and the display of wedding gifts will be quite valuable. They're insured, of course, but some of them — one set in particular — are priceless, irreplaceable antiques. I'll pay you a thousand dollars for about four hours work. I would assume that's higher than your normal rate?"

"Depends how posh the client is," Cranmer said.

Maneri met Nicole's grey eyes and grinned wolfishly. Differently, she glanced down at her hands clasped in her lap. But he thought

he'd detected a twinkle in her eye. Maneri had the impression Nicole Lassiter was gauging him carefully. Unconsciously, his fingers stroked his crimson beard.

"Will you accept the assignment, Mr. Cranmer?" Lassiter asked stiffly.

Cranmer's checking account was currently able to flick tongues at a snake without bending over, so he raised his hands, palms outward, and said, "What are these gizmos you want me to protect?"

Lassiter flinched at Cranmer's terminology.

For the first time Nicole spoke. She had a low, throaty voice that tingled Maneri's spine. "There's a lot of silver, Mr. Cranmer, but one set in particular needs to be watched — a tea service created by Hester Bateman."

Cranmer scratched his nose. "Good old Hester," he said. "Who the hell's Hester Bateman?"

"Oh, she's quite famous, Mr. Cranmer. Probably the only woman silversmith of any consequence in history. She worked on Burnhill Row in London in the 1770's. An old family friend is giving me this tea service for the wedding. It's rather plain, actually, and to look at it you wouldn't think it's worth \$30,000.

"But that's what it's insured for. It's been authenticated, of course, and it's early Bateman. The service bears her mark — script letters H and B in an

escalloped oval. I simply couldn't bear to lose it."

There were some questions Cranmer didn't think it prudent to ask. He could have Cindy look up "escalloped oval" later. He glanced at Maneri.

"Not me, dad," said the redhead instantly. "I'm flush, remember?"

This was Maneri's favorite part of his association with Cranmer. The detective agency was in Cranmer's name alone and Maneri functioned only as an assistant. Cranmer wanted him to become a partner but Maneri always refused the offers — primarily so he could pick and choose his jobs, partly because he detested chains of any sort.

Cranmer emitted a sigh which was almost a moan. "All right, Lassiter, I'll stand watch over your trinkets. Tell me when and where."

Lassiter supplied the information. As he and Nicole left the office, Cranmer snarled after them: "Don't expect me to wear a tuxedo."

THERE ARE A HANDFUL of decent residential districts remaining within the confines of Oklahoma City. Most monied people have moved away to the northwest, primarily Nichols Hills, to escape the perspiring proletariat, but the Lassiter estate was huge enough to provide its own seclusion. The structure, which looked more like an ancient Athenian

office building than a home, was ringed with an electric fence topped by three strands of barbed wire. Cranmer, standing by the bar, felt a bit redundant.

For Cranmer's purposes the reception had been designed with geographical perfection. Wedding presents were piled on a table in the same room with the upstairs bar. This made for a lot of foot traffic until a band started playing downstairs, but it kept him close to the bourbon.

He had seen Brooks Lassiter once, along with the bride and groom. Lassiter, wearing tails, was abrupt. Nicole introduced her new husband, a skinny fellow whose entire chin was a cleft, as Sanford Moret. Moret mumbled something or other. Cranmer figured the groom had avoided a long, painful and unprofitable life by marrying money.

The first trouble Cranmer faced came about 9:30 when a playful group of youngsters decided it would be fun to hide the wedding gifts. He kidded them out of it without having to shatter any ulnas.

The atmosphere was meant to romantic, he supposed. A light descending from the ceiling — not quite impressive enough to be labeled a chandelier — illuminated the display of wedding gifts. Everything shimmered brightly except the Hester Bateman tea service, which gleamed dully.

The rest of the room depended

for light upon a candelabra with eight candles which emitted a waxy smell and very little light from behind the bar. The bartender, a black man, had complained mildly that he lacked light to mix drinks by, but Cranmer assured him the guests wouldn't know the difference after the first two rounds — and the detective had proved to be a prophet.

By 11 p.m. Cranmer and the bartender had cemented a friendly relationship. With only an hour to go, Cranmer used his Weller's and water to wash down the first pair of Demerol tablets of the evening. Before his nose started tingling, all hell broke loose.

The electric lights in the room went out as abruptly as an idealist's dream. Random shouts, varying with the degree of alcohol behind them, echoed through the large house.

Cranmer had been hired to watch the wedding gifts. Reluctantly, he left his drink on the bar and crossed to the display table. The candlelight provided an eerie glow, bright enough to show broad movements, too dim for fine details.

Cranmer's .357 Colt Python was in his right hand, his cane in his left.

He waited. Odd sounds came from below.

He was in charge of the wedding gifts. If people were murdering one another in the other rooms that was someone else's problem.



The room containing the presents was nearly deserted. All but the most serious drinkers had negotiated the stairs to the rauous band. The one advantage Cranmer saw in the near blackout was that the "musicians" had been stilled.

Suddenly a slender redhead man with a full red beard burst through the room's single door, a door leading to a corridor. The redhead headed for the gift-laden table.

Before Cranmer could react he heard a sound behind him, felt a crushing blow to the back of his neck and fell to the floor unconscious.

"COOK WAS WRONG," Brooks Lassiter stated. "You're surly and impatient right enough, but you're

about as efficient as a Watergate burglar. We've already put the alarm out for your accomplice."

"You mean my assistant?" Cranmer asked, rubbing the back of his neck. The blow had also caught the lower part of his skull and blood was dripping freely.

"The only thing stolen was the Bateman tea service. The most valuable property around. Stolen by a redhead with a red beard while you faked unconsciousness. Very amateurish, Cranmer, very amateurish."

Nicole Lassiter sat in a nearby chair, curled up like a kitten. Despite her expressionless facade, the grey eyes gleamed, reminding Cranmer of the tea service beneath the chandelier — plain but expensive. Nicole brushed blonde hair away from her face in the eternal feminine gesture.

Two policemen stood in the room, one glaring at Cranmer, the other letting his eyes wander about the room.

The glarer said, "Don't worry, Mr. Lassiter, we'll locate your property. I've had my eyes on this Cranmer character for a long time."

"Your attention span must be improving," Cranmer told Lieutenant Vince Markham. While Markham was spluttering, Cranmer spoke to the other policeman, this one, too, in plainclothes: "How do you read it, Drago?"

The sergeant seemed perfectly at home, not at all intimidated by

the presence of his superior and the wealthy. Officially, this was Drago's case — he was the sergeant in charge of the Robbery/Homicide division of the Oklahoma City Police Department. Markham's appearance was strictly political because of the Lassiter money.

Drago, a short muscular man with thick black hair, shrugged. "Seems like you took one hell of a shot to the back of the head just to establish credibility," he commented mildly.

Markham glared at him. "Obviously he had to make it appear authentic," he snapped. The lieutenant had about the size and intelligence of a wooden fence post.

"Still," said the bulky sergeant, whose clear blue eyes might have threatened Paul Newman, "Steve's many things, perhaps, but a masochist isn't one of them."

"Besides," Cranmer put in, watching both the Lassiters and Markham, "I'm inefficient, remember?"

A uniformed policeman entered the room: "We've arrested Maneri," he preened. "Found him zonked out in his apartment. Man without conscience problems, I guess."

"Man without a conscience, period, I'd say," said Brooks Lassiter in his incongruous tenor voice.

"Yessir," said Markham and

the uniformed copper, almost in unison.

"You find the tea service?" demanded Brooks Lassiter.

"Nah, Maneri's too slick for that," said the uniform. But we've got him in the slammer and I imagine your service will turn up. He hadn't much time to dispose of it."

"What about Maneri's car?" Cranmer asked.

The uniform swelled as if sucking helium. "We found your accessory's car, motor still warm, keys in the ignition, parked at his apartment. Four guests at the reception gave us a positive make on it. Maneri's old Studebaker's pretty distinctive."

"They see this redhead use the car?"

"Hard to miss. It was parked right before the front door, motor running, in the circular drive. Maneri dived into it and took off spitting gravel."

Cranmer's eyes glinted briefly, yellowly. "Well, no one can accuse him of subtlety. Am I under arrest?"

Almost wistfully, Markham said, "I don't see how we can hold you right now. But you'd better stick close, Cranmer."

"Oh, I'll do that. Just keep looking over your shoulder. One thing, Drago?"

"Yeah, Steve."

"Do me a favor and check out that black bartender. Unless someone else snuck in, he has to

be the one who hit me."

"I'll noodle around," Drago promised, as Markham snorted.

"Hell," said the lieutenant, "I know what happened. You miscalculated and hit yourself too hard. Luckily for you, though, it makes you appear innocent."

"Yeah, well, appearances are deceiving," Cranmer muttered obscurely. "Okay if I go visit Maneri?"

"Want to check the details of your story, huh," Markham sneered.

"Whatever. How about it?"

"I'll call," said Drago. "They'll let you in."

Everyone in the room except Cranmer glared at the sergeant. Drago remained oblivious but there was a trace of amusement in his pure blue eyes as he traded glances with Cranmer.

"YOUNG MANERI, I'd say you've finally been hustled. What's your version?"

"A wondrous occurrence, dad. Somebody knocked me over the head, but the Samaritan instinct took over, I guess, and he shot me full of morphine. I'm still half stoned."

In the visitor's cubicle at the Oklahoma City jail, Maneri was still obviously groggy. His blue eyes were faded and he had trouble articulating. "So, what's shaking, dad? Why'm I here?"

Briefly, Cranmer filled him in. "Your good Samaritan was more

of a Machiavelli," he told the redhead. "They wanted you out of commission long enough for them to pull the job and they wanted you at home so you'd have no alibi."

"Why are the coppers so sure it was me?"

"All redheads look alike by candlelight. Plus which your Studebaker was identified at the Lassiter place. Cops found it back at your apartment, engine still warm, keys in the ignition."

Maneri's red eyebrows drooped into fallen parentheses. "Hell, dad, I don't leave my keys in the ignition. Not since I was a trusting lad of twelve or so."

"Uh-huh. Listen, Butch, a few things not quite right happened tonight. If I'm reading them properly, I think I can spring you fairly quick. But I need another assistant."

Maneri considered it dreamily. He wore a set of prison-blue coveralls, with a number over his heart. Finally he figured it. "You need some tailing help."

"Right. Any of your buddies that might could handle that?"

"Why not one of your colleagues?"

"I'm flat. Looking for a freebie."

"Well, considering it's only me . . ." Another long pause. Maneri scratched his beard as if searching for lice. "Okay, dad," he mumbled. "Go to The Ikhnaton and find a big Indian called Cochise. He and I are pretty

tight. He's a quiet type who likes gameplaying. Just explain the situation."

"That slimehole?" Cranmer protested. "Listen, young Maneri, there are limits to how far I'll lower myself to get you out of a tight spot."

"There's worse places — such as jail cells. The Ikhnaton's not so bad. You just don't like my friends; I always suspected you were a closet snob."

"Yeah, well. If the Lassiters are the opposite edge of the coin, your pesthole can be no worse. I'll hit it in the morning. It opens around dawn, I imagine?"

"What time is it now?" Cranmer glanced at his digital wrist watch. "1:36."

"Then it will still be open. Cochise will be there, ten to one."

"I'd never bet with a man clever enough to wind up in jail." Cranmer spoke neutrally.

"Funny. Hey, dad, score me some Demerol. This looks like being a long night."

Surreptitiously, Cranmer slipped the redhead six of the round yellow tablets through the cage. "For God's sake," he instructed, "take them one at a time. I doubt your tolerance matches mine."

"I doubt anyone's does," said Maneri.

Cranmer stepped inside The Ikhnaton, paused in the portal, winced. Music bombarded the room. It sounded to Cranmer as if several radio stations playing

different songs as loudly as possible were competing for attention.

Hunching his shoulders against the noise, he limped toward the section of the club which contained pool tables. An Indian no larger than the doorway blocked the passage separating the pool area from the rest of the club.

Cranmer hobbled over, tapped him on the shoulder.

Unhurriedly, the huge Indian turned, moving only his head. His eyes were as black as the chances of doubling down on twelve. His long black hair fell past his shoulders and he wore a yellow headband bearing a design Cranmer could not decipher. He did not blink. Cranmer matched the black stare evenly.

"You Cochise?" he asked.

The black eyes glinted. "Mr. Sutton is the name, friend."

Cranmer shrugged irritably. "Whatever. My name's Cranmer. Mean anything to you?"

"I've heard the name," the Indian admitted, his tone committing him to nothing.

"I need to talk to you. Maneri sent me. Let's get out of this pisspot and find some silence."

The Indian hesitated. "The Shooter sent you?"

"You hard of hearing?"

"Relax," Sutton said blandly. "You don't have to prove you're a badass. We can talk outside."

They left the club, leaned against one of the cars parked outside. The clamor from inside still

aggravated Cranmer — but in his present mood he would have been annoyed at being informed he had won the Irish sweepstakes.

Concisely, Cranmer outlined the situation. "Let's drift over to my place," he concluded. "I've a phone call or two to make and I like to hear myself."

Sutton shrugged.

"You have a car here?" Cranmer asked.

The Indian confirmed that.

"Good. We'll ride together, save me taxi fare."

"You don't drive?" The Indian's soft voice belied his size.

"If I could drive I wouldn't spoil what's left of my reputation by having a cab take me to this pukehole."

"You're a gracious sort." The black eyes examined Cranmer for a long moment. Cranmer returned the gaze with total indifference. Finally the Indian shrugged. "I like the Shooter. If I can help him, I guess I'll have to put up with you."

"Very touching," Cranmer replied. "Let's move."

Cranmer's house was a three-bedroom affair, far too large for his needs. But the investigator disliked feeling closed in. After mixing drinks for himself and the enormous Indian, Cranmer punched buttons on his phone.

"Cindy there? . . . Hi, love, hope you weren't in the midst of an orgasm . . . I've a job for you . . . So instruct him in the ways of

onanism. Butch is in jail . . . Yeah . . . Nearly, but they didn't have enough to hold me. Listen, I want you to start calling all the city dicks we're on speaking terms with . . . Yes, I know what time it is . . ."

When his instructions to his secretary were completed, Cranmer punched a different set of buttons.

"Sergeant Drago, please . . . Cliff, Steve. What do you hear? . . . Terrific! How about the bartender? . . . Got an address? . . . Super, a model of efficient police work . . . Likewise . . . I should have this cleared up for you quick enough to break Markham's heart. Thanks, Cliff."

Replacing the receiver, Cranmer recited instructions to Cochise Sutton. As the detective spoke, a glint of grudging respect evidence itself in the large man's black eyes.

"Make yourself comfortable," Cranmer concluded. "We won't move till dawn."

"Dawn!" Incredulity was the first overt sign of emotion Sutton had displayed since Cranmer approached him in The Ikhnaton.

"Dawn," Cranmer repeated firmly. "That's when the sun rises."

"Except on cloudy days," Sutton said.

"Finding the sun through the apertures in those clouds is what I'm here for. You can have any bedroom but this one."

THE SUN ROSE on schedule. It was bright enough to discourage any clouds, vivid enough for Cranmer to don sunglasses. The cab in which Cranmer fought sleep was parked a block from the Lassiter residence. So far, nothing was stirring. The rich sleep late. Igniting another Camel, Cranmer cracked a window and aimed exhaled smoke at it.

In the front seat, the hackie slept soundly. Cranmer hoped Cochise Sutton wasn't engaged in a like occupation.

At 8:20 a.m. a black Cadillac pulled out of the Lassiter drive. Cranmer's eyes gleamed as he identified the driver. He punched the cabbie awake, told him to follow the Caddy.

Their route was not circuitous. The Caddy drove at speed directly to a cheap building on Western Avenue, near downtown, a building which rented rooms without frills. The Caddy parked. The driver stepped out and hurried toward the rooming house.

Across the street, Cranmer saw Cochise Sutton parked in a vintage Pontiac. Paying off his driver — slicing the tip because the man had slept instead of providing conversation — Cranmer limped to Sutton's car, climbed into the shotgun position.

"Looking good," he commented.

"You said there'd be three," Sutton complained sleepily.

"Couple of chances. Could be

the other man's inside — maybe they'll meet him later. You have any trouble with your target?"

"Uh-uh. He wasn't looking back."

They maintained a quiet vigil before the rooming house. When a mailman sauntered up the street, Cranmer straightened. "This should be it. If not, it's instant replay time tomorrow."

"At dawn?" Sutton grumbled.

The mailman deposited his load into slotted receptacles in the lobby of the rooming house. Not two minutes after the door closed behind the mailman, the black man who had tended bar at the reception appeared downstairs, opened a box and removed a small envelope. He scurried back up the stairs.

Sardonically, Cranmer clapped his hands. "Let's hear it for the Postal Service. This buggy ready to move?"

"It's ready."

"They may walk, but I doubt it. Five gets you twenty they go to the bus station."

Within ten minutes the black and the driver of the Lassiter Cadillac emerged, climbed into the car and drove sedately away, Sutton following in their wake.

"These characters won't win many medals for shrewdness," Cranmer said almost cheerfully.

Without speaking, Sutton followed the Caddy to the bus terminal on Sheridan. Inside, the depot was packed with a normal



Saturday crowd: legitimate travelers (at least people who planned on riding buses) combined with derelicts who snored in half-strangled fashion. The terminal, like all bus depots, smelled as if some undiscovered corpse rotted nearby.

Cranmer paid no attention to the derelicts, but his eyes scanned the rest of the terminal alertly. The black bartender and his companion moved to the rows of storage lockers. Cranmer grunted with satisfaction. *It's good for the ego to be right occasionally,* he thought.

"You stick with our quail,"

he told Sutton. "Don't flush them till they remove what's in the locker." Peering about he added, "I'll wait over there with an overall perspective. I'm no great believer in trust: I figure Maneri's double has to be here to check on the pickup."

The large Indian nodded with quiet solemnity. "You want me to take them when they empty the locker?"

"No. Wait till I wave my cane at you."

"Sophisticated signal." With his coal-black eyes devoid of expression, Sutton asked, "Shall I hurt them, and, if so, how badly?"

"Jesus!" snapped Cranmer. "Play it by ear. At a guess, I'd say if they start shooting at you, you might break a wrist or two if they're unlucky enough to miss. If they don't resist, just hold onto them. But not before I wave my cane."

Adjusting his headband, Sutton moved across the terminal toward the storage lockers like a sated bear.

Cranmer settled into his vantage point, lit a Camel. He had to stay in the background early. It was obvious the crooks had cased him and would split immediately if he hobbled up to them shouting, "Halt, police!" or some such idiocy.

The pair Cranmer and Sutton had been tailing located their locker, opened it, removed a box large enough to hold the Hester

Bateman tea service. They glanced around furtively. Cranmer did the same. He was proud of Sutton, who had slumped into a chair in the row nearest the lockers. The Indian looked a typical derelict.

When Cranmer spotted his man, he didn't stiffen nor did his heart begin to pound erratically. It's not astounding when the shoes you drop hit the floor — and Cranmer had been as certain of this man's appearance as he was of the law of gravity.

The man moving toward the storage lockers bore no resemblance to Maneri other than general height and build. His hair was dark and he was clean shaven. But the size was right and the walk was the same as that of the redhead who had heisted the tea set. Few people realize that their walk is their most distinctive characteristic.

When he neared the duo Cranmer and Sutton had followed, Cranmer started to move, waving his cane at Sutton. The Indian rose lithely, moved quickly, but even with his limp Cranmer reached the trio first.

"Hi, folks," he said cheerily.

The black bartender froze, stupefied. Nicole Lassiter calmly brushed blonde hair away from her face and stared at Cranmer with impassive grey eyes.

The man who had impersonated Maneri put a hand inside his coat. He may have been reaching for

a cigarette or FBI credentials, but suddenly, almost without visible movement, Cranmer's Python was in his right hand.

Dispassionately, he shot the man in the right shoulder. The flat crack of the pistol drew little attention in the crowded terminal. A few of the sleepers shifted positions uncomfortably. Those who recognized the sound for what it was carefully maintained their distance.

Cursing, the man removed his hand from inside his coat and moved it to his shattered shoulder.

"Anyone else want to cut up?" Cranmer asked dryly, eyes focussed particularly on the black bartender. No one moved. Sutton, a half dozen paces behind the activity, could still have been an innocent observer.

Shrugging, Cranmer said, "I don't appreciate being slugged." With a quick motion, he flipped his cane up and grasped the tip in both hands. Then he smashed the handle of the cane into the black bartender's stomach. The bartender doubled over, retching and moaning.

Cranmer turned cheerfully to Nicole Lassiter. "Well," he informed her, "that about wraps it up. No need for you to be foolish. Hand me the package."

Her grey eyes hardened into slate. "You're a tough guy, huh?" she ground out. "So stop me."

Small package under her arm, she began running swiftly toward

the nearest exit. Cranmer could easily have let Sutton take her, but she had been the one who fingered Maneri. After she had taken no more than half a dozen strides, he coolly used the Colt Python to shoot her in the left calf. She crumpled.

Sutton nudged Cranmer. "And you wanted me to break wrists?" he said in disbelief. "Do I call the fuzz or do we split?"

"Save your change," Cranmer instructed. "The law's been behind us all morning. A caravan."

When Sutton turned, he saw a pair of men approaching whose plainclothes were as distinctive as uniforms.

"You all through, Steve?" asked a muscular cop with piercing blue eyes. "Or do you want to shoot some ticket sellers for practice?"

"Now, Cliff, you saw it. The man went inside his coat — the woman tried to escape. I didn't hurt either of them to speak of."

"Sure you didn't," agreed Drago. "You've always been a lousy shot. This read the way it looks?"

Cranmer shrugged. "It looks readable enough. You run a check on the fellow who played Maneri last night, then let's go rub Brooks Lassiter's nose in it."

"You sure that's Maneri's double?" Drago asked skeptically.

"He moves the same way."

Drago understood that. "Let me call my troops," he said.

"And, Cliff, one more thing."

Drago waited expectantly.

"Shake Maneri loose. He deserves to be at the Lassiter place."

As Drago left, the big Indian ambled forward slowly, extended his right hand to Cranmer. Surprised, Cranmer shook the proffered hand. It was a firm clasp, not a contest.

"Here on in, you call me Cochise."

"I'll do that," Cranmer promised. "Now, you run on home."

SHORTLY AFTER NOON they were all congregated at Brooks Lassiter's estate, save for Lieutenant Vince Markham, who did have enough sense to realize when a political connection had lost its clout.

Drago had been busy. The details had jelled and they knew the full story. As was his way, the bulky sergeant let Cranmer tell the tale. After all, Cranmer had been the one who had taken Brooks Lassiter's flack all last evening.

Maneri sat cross-legged in a chair, still smelling of jail. His eyes were somewhat glazed and he had problems following Cranmer's lecture. Too often, according to Cranmer's calculations, the redhead scratched his nose.

Brooks Lassiter sat in an easy chair opposite Cranmer. On a couch across the room, close enough for easy listening, Drago

sat between the black bartender (whose name, they had learned, was Frazier) and Nicole Lassiter. Beside Nicole was Maneri's impostor, who had been identified as Randall Young. Both had suffered only minor bullet wounds and had been quickly patched up.

"You caused it," Cranmer said calmly, aiming a finger at Brooks Lassiter. "You knew Nicole and Randall Young had a heavy thing going. But you wouldn't allow a nobody into your noble household. You like chinless, gutless, yesmen like Sanford Moret — who will soon be your ex-son-in-law.

"You refused to permit a marriage between Young and your daughter. You pressured her into marrying Moret. But you overlooked the vital factor — your daughter is just as bullheaded as you are.

"It occurred to her that if she married Moret, there'd be wedding presents out the ass."

Brooks Lassiter was the only person in the room to wince at Cranmer's diction.

"But then you threw in a ringer," Cranmer continued. "Being prosperous yourself, you know there's lots of crooks in the world. So you insisted on security arrangements.

"That busted Nicole's plans — but only momentarily. She thinks well on her feet, that one. I had my secretary check around, and it turns out I was only fourth on the list. Think back and you'll see she

talked you out of the first three — subtly, I would hope. She was looking for a setup and needed someone about Randall Young's size. Maneri fitted perfectly.

"While he was lounging on the couch thinking he was irresistible to women, Nicole was checking him out as a fall guy. The red hair and beard were an unexpected bonus. All she wanted was someone close to Young's size and shape, but with a fake beard it was a cinch — no one noticed anything but the beard."

"This is nonsensical," snapped Lassiter. "If what you say has any truth in it, why didn't Nicole go through with the wedding and then make off with *all* the gifts."

"The answer to that should be painfully obvious. She didn't crave spending that first night with Moret."

Lassiter mused, "She did demand a two-man agency. And she talked me out of the first ones, said they weren't trustworthy."

"So — confirmation," said Cranmer. "As if we needed any. So Young took Maneri out, stole his car. There were about three things wrong with the rest of the setup, discounting the fact I knew Maneri would have no interest in a two-hundred-year-old tea service. Wrong kind of tea. First, the candles.

"Remember the room with the presents was well lit. Display light dangling over the gifts. But there was this halfassed candle burner

behind the bar. Even smelled bad.

"But Nicole and Young needed light. Not as much as the overhead provided — that would make it too easy to see the redhead wasn't Maneri. So they killed the electricity. Dim candlelight was perfect. In the excitement, all anyone noticed was the red hair and beard. They had Frazier, the bartender, knock me over the head — offered him a grand, no less — because I was the only person in the room both armed and familiar with Maneri."

Cranmer hesitated, checking points off in his mind.

"Yeah," he said. "Frazier coshed me too hard. We checked him out and he's no expert. He hit me so hard even Markham — whose life would be fulfilled if he could lock me and his wife and in-laws in the same cell — couldn't buy that I'd hit myself."

"Another mistake was leaving the keys in Maneri's car. I guess Young was a little panicked by then, so he went away leaving the keys in the ignition. Now, Maneri trusts people about as far as he can throw his left eye. So I knew he was clear."

Cranmer had all the eyes in the room, save Maneri's and Drago's, which were checking reactions in the audience. Maneri scratched his nose again and Cranmer frowned.

"Another point," Cranmer said abruptly. "In my office, Nicole acted like the tea service was life

itself. But she didn't even blink after it was heisted. You really should have shed a few tears," he admonished her.

She didn't speak to him.

"That's about it," Cranmer concluded. "You understand, those are just the things that turned me on to the plot. I figured the participants would get together, and they did. We found a red wig and a fake red beard at this rooming house on Western where your daughter and Young have been shacking up."

"They were afraid to keep the service with them, so they stored it in a locker and mailed themselves the key. That's an old standby. At a guess, they didn't mail the tea service itself because they didn't have time to pack it carefully."

"They met at the rooming house, I followed them, and Drago — not an overly trusting sort himself — followed me. We've got it wrapped up tight, Lassiter."

There was a long silence in the room. On the couch, Randall Young and Nicole Lassiter held hands. Cranmer yawned and Maneri rubbed his nose.

Thoughtfully, Brooks Lassiter said, "It's not illegal to take your own property, is it?"

Cranmer's eyes flashed. Drago stiffened.

"Not as far as I know," said Cranmer. "But that tea service wasn't Young's — nor Frazier's."

Lassiter nodded. "So if Nicole married Young and the bartender

came down with amnesia, criminal charges could be avoided?"

"Unless Maneri and I want to file assault charges."

"How much?" Lassiter demanded, using his boardroom voice.

Cranmer looked at Maneri, who scratched his nose and grinned meaninglessly. Softly, Cranmer told Drago, "Cliff, I think you'd better make sure your car's still outside. You know how many thieves there are in this neighborhood."

Scowling, Drago left the room.

"How much?" Lassiter repeated.

"To forget it ever happened? And if you let Nicole marry Young?" Cranmer specified.

"Yes, yes."

"And no assault charges against Frazier? He's an amateur anyway and I've already squared it with him."

"No charges of any sort. Nothing to tip the press."

"Ah, the press," Cranmer sighed in satisfaction. "You play golf, Lassiter?"

He nodded grumpily.

"Then you know how to press a Nassau. I recovered a thirty thousand dollar whatzit for you. Normally, I'd press for sixty grand, but I'm not a greedy man. I'll settle for thirty."

Lassiter spluttered.

"Then again," Cranmer mused, "I've helped restore peace and harmony to your family. Maybe I

should press for the sixty."

Lassiter gave him an unfriendly look.

Cranmer spread his hands. "Don't forget I have a partner — one who may now be hooked on downers. And downers make my man talkative . . ."

Lassiter glared at them. Finally he muttered, "Fifteen thousand."

"That's all peace and reputation is worth to you?" Cranmer marveled. "Make it thirty-five."

Sensing the bidding was going in the wrong direction, having had Cranmer's stubbornness proved to him, and not loving the glare Nicole was giving him, Lassiter relented. "All right," he said. "Thirty thousand."

"You mean thirty-five."

"All right, Goddamnit — thirty-five."

"A trifle," Cranmer assured

him. "If you'll find a check, I just happen to have a pen handy. And, by the way, congratulations," he said to the couple on the couch.

Their expressions were ecstatic enough but directed strictly at each other. Cranmer doubted they had heard him.

Lassiter began writing the check. Cranmer winked at Maneri, who scratched his nose. *I told him to pop those pills one at a time,* Cranmer thought perversely.

Then Lassiter handed him a check for \$35,000. Justice served with a successful press, Cranmer and Maneri left the room, not recipients of fond farewells.

Cranmer figured he'd catch hell from Drago. Cops just don't comprehend the judicial system, he thought.



THE TWO-TIMER

No one who knew Oliver Kendall liked him. The problem facing Sheriffs Wharton and Moorhead was to select amid a host of foes, the man or woman who hated the miserly millionaire enough to kill him at the time he died — or if he was dead.

by LAWRENCE TREAT

IF WHAT OLIVER KENDALL accomplished in life seemed incredible, his death was even more so. In a way, it was the logical finish to a turbulent career that started in Appalachia, blazed through a controversial term in congress, ripped through a series of charges of fraud, embezzlement and influence peddling. It ended in seclusion, with Kendall apparently mourning for his wife and barely interested in a few minor banks that he directed more or less as a hobby. His main wealth was safely invested in government bonds and blue chip stocks.

His obituary, in the local Lead-

burg *Courier*, recounted the main events of his life without catching the essential flavor of the man, which was rank. Willy Wharton, chief of Le Page County police, and Dan Moorhead, his counterpart in Morgan on the other side of the state line, discussed the man over a beer or two.

"He was a cousin of Katie's," Willy said, referring to his wife. "She was fond of the old boy and she claims his death was no accident. She says he was too careful about fires for anything like that to happen by mistake."

Dan took the idea imperturbably. He looked like a plump Irish



Buddha and sometimes behaved accordingly. "*Women!*" he said.

Willy shifted his body so that his long legs had a little more room to maneuver. "But she's got a point," he said. "He was an experienced woodsman. He went to that cabin up in Lake What's-it-called a couple of times a year, and he usually went alone."

"Lake Minnequantassett," Dan said.

"Okay. It's five hundred miles from here and what's the difference what it's called? Kendall's not your worry, even though he lived in your bailiwick, and he's certainly not mine. Still — talked to the sheriff up there?"

"He said the fire started around dawn and they're lucky the whole forest didn't go up. He said all that was left was the charred body and the stone chimney. It seems Kendall'd come up the day before, bought some groceries and said he was going to read a few books and catch himself some fish, and he hoped nobody would come around and bother him. It's too bad that nobody did."

"He was quite a guy," Willy said. "The way he ran his business and refused to keep books." Willy chuckled. "Claimed he kept everything in his head and paid his fair share of taxes, and challenged the government to do anything about it. I bet that attorney of his made a nice bundle on the government suits that followed."

"Carstairs," Dan said. "Allen

Carstairs, and Kendall was just about his whole legal practice."

"Yeah," Willy said. After a gulp or two or beer he remarked, "Who identified the body?"

"Not enough left to identify, and what for? Kendall went up to his cabin, he was seen there, and the cabin burnt down and his body was in it. Isn't that enough?"

"Mebbe, but I keep wondering whether he had much money on him. That sheriff up at Lake What's-it-called —"

"Minnequantassett," Dan said.

"You could stop in at Kendall's bank and find out if he drew much cash to take along with him."

"Could," Dan said, "but why should I?"

Willy didn't answer, and he went home expecting Katie to tell him that Oliver Kendall had probably been murdered and his cabin burnt down to conceal the crime, and that Willy ought to do something about it. But instead, she told him that Kendall's lawyer had called her to say she was mentioned in the will.

"How much?" Willy said.

"I didn't ask, but it was sweet of him to remember me, wasn't it? Particularly when he had a son and daughter and all those grandchildren to think of."

"His children hated him and he hated them, and you know it. He divided off that big house of his into two parts, one for his son and family, the other for himself. You told me once that he hadn't been

in the other half in five years.”

“Not since his wife died,” Katie said, sighing and lapsing into silence. With a kind of reverence Willy watched her and wondered what ethereal thoughts were going through her head.

Presently she looked up and sighed again. “I wonder how much I’ll get,” she said.

She found out the following afternoon and erupted into Willy’s office with the news.

“Willy!” she said excitedly. “I just came from the reading of the will. I get ten thousand!”

Willy grinned. “I always wanted to have a rich wife,” he said, “and now I got one.”

“But I have to tell you what happened,” she said. “We were all there. His attorney who was reading the will —”

“Allen Carstairs,” Willy said. “Yes?”

“ — and somebody from the museum, because they’re getting big bequest. Then Josh Enright, who was his best friend ever since they were in their teens, and Oliver’s daughter and his son. We were in their part of the house and Mr. Carstairs was reading the will when Richie — that’s the oldest grandson —”

“Wait a minute,” Willy said. “Let me get this straight. Oliver’s daughter, what’s her name?”

“Barbara Reading. She’s married, she has three children.”

“Richie?”

“No. He belongs to Thomas.”

“Thomas Kendall. That’s the son. So you were saying?”

“It was all very formal until Richie came running in, yelling that we were bugged. He said he’d been playing CIA man up in the attic and he’d found a tape recorder, and it was running. After that we all went up to the attic, and sure enough, there was a tape recorder attached to a timing device that turned it on and off. Thomas stopped it and played it back, and it was a recording of everything we’d been saying in the parlor. What do you think of that?”

“I think,” Willy said, “that the house is in Morgan County and it’s none of my business.”

Still, he kept wondering about it, and about Kendall and that fire. He figured he’d talk it over with Dan that night when, as usual, they met in their booth at the Right Side bar.

Willy arrived a little before eight, and found Dan waiting for him. Dan came straight to the point.

“Two weeks ago,” he said, “Kendall drew twenty thousand. In cash.”

“Did you tell the sheriff up in Lake What’s-it-called?”

“Minnequantasset, and he said it was too bad so much money got burnt up.”

“Think it did?”

“I think that when Kendall was buying his groceries, somebody spotted all that dough on him, so they followed him up to the cabin,

killed him and robbed him and then burnt down the cabin to conceal the crime. Sheriff up there ought to know that, and probably does."

"Going to do anything about it?" Willy asked.

"I got enough worries without that. Know Josh Evans?"

"Friends of Kendall's. Why?"

"They had one of those funny little rivalries over chess. They used to play once a week or so and they kept score. Kendall won seventy-six times, Josh thirty-one, and seventeen draws. He came into my office today and said he was a better chess player than Kendall, only Kendall cheated."

"How do you cheat at chess?" Willy asked.

"He didn't say. But what he came to tell me was about that Kendall kid, the grandson."

"Richie?" Willie said. "Katie gave me the whole story. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know. I went to the house and located the mike. It was hanging on a nail at the back of a cabinet. No prints on it. Then I took the tape recorder and examined it for prints, and it seems most everybody there had handled it. My guess is that somebody expects to try to upset the will and figured some evidence might show up when the will was read. You got any ideas?"

"I'd like to hear that tape," Willy said. "Or at least find out what was on it."

"I can tell you that," Dan said. "The lawyer was the last one to get there, and while they were waiting for him, they were talking about Kendall. His son said he was mean and dishonest and he hated him, and his daughter said pretty much the same thing, only she was more emotional about it."

"Josh defended him. Said Kendall had had to fight his way up from poverty, that he'd learnt that you had to be tough in order to succeed, and that he, Josh, had no better friend in the world and if he was the only mourner, so be it."

"Then Katie spoke up for him and said he was a complicated man and hard to understand, but that he'd always fascinated her. After that, Carstairs came in. He mentioned some of the legal technicalities about probate, and he was reading the will when Richie came in and scared the hell out of everybody. Make anything from that?"

"Who could have gotten into the attic?"

"Anybody. Or at least, anybody who knew the house. Seems to me that we won't find out who until we find out why."

"I'll talk to Katie," Willy said. "She was there, she may have caught something that will give us a lead."

"A lead to what?" Dan said, settling back comfortably. "There's no crime, no violation, so why worry?"

The worry, however, began at

noon on the following day when a pair of small boys wandering in the Beaver Creek woods uncovered a body in a shallow grave. They ran out to the road and flagged down the first car, which happened to be Buddy's Garage tow truck, with Buddy himself at the wheel.

He climbed out of his truck, walked a hundred and fifty feet of logging road and saw the body, barely under the earth and protected mostly by a thin layer of leaves.

"It's Kendall," he said. "Oliver Kendall. But he's supposed to be dead and buried two days ago."

Back in his truck, Buddy picked up his radio phone and called Willy.

"Buddy here," he said. "A couple of kids found a body in the woods near Beaver Creek, and you know what? It's Oliver Kendall!"

Willy's mind grasped the essential point at once. "Exactly where?" he asked.

"You know where the creek crosses the road at the little bridge where that car cracked up last year? Well, maybe a couple of hundred yards upstream from there."

"Near that old logging road?"

"That's right. It cuts in through some pine, and then —"

"Was the body to the left or right of the road as you walk in?"

"A little to the right, just before it gets swampy."

"That puts it in Morgan

County," Willy said. "Call Dan." And Willy hung up and resumed work on the list of what he and Katie could do with \$10,000.

Later in the day, with merely casual interest, he heard the radio report that Oliver Kendall had been shot at close range by a thirty-eight caliber bullet and that the body had been dragged from the road and left in the shallow grave where two boys had found it.

As Willy expected, Dan had a busy time of it and didn't get to the Right Side bar until after nine in the evening. Willy was waiting patiently.

"I hung around," he said, "in case I could help out."

Dan scowled, signaled for a beer and leaned back wearily. "You sure cut it fine," he said. "Fifty feet further, and the body would have been in Le Page, and your worry."

Willy's smile was smug. "Dan," he said, "maybe the case isn't as tough as you think. Once you find out whose body was in that cabin up at Lake What's-it-called —"

"Minnequantassett," Dan said.

"Well, whatever it is, once you identify that body, the case is probably half solved."

"I spoke to the sheriff up there and he has a report of a grave being opened up and a body removed, so it looks like nobody was killed in the cabin. Nobody at all. Just somebody's body burnt up."

"Then Kendall faked his own death," Willy said.

"Looks that way. Up at Minnequantassett he could have hired somebody to rob a grave and bring the body to the cabin. Then he must have set the fire and come back here, secretly. But why?"

"Katie has that much figured out," Willy said, and waited for Dan to ask him the question. After a few seconds Dan finally did.

"Well," he said. "What does she think?"

"He wanted to read his own obituary, and hear what people had to say about him."

Dan leaned back. "*Women!*" he said, and finished his beer.

He didn't speak again until he'd ordered a second one. "Leaving that aside," he said, "he was probably killed for his money. He drew twenty grand, remember? He must have had most of it on him when he was shot, but it was gone when I examined him."

"Maybe that's why he was killed," Willy said. "For his money."

"How would anybody know he had it?" Dan asked.

Willy's grunt conceded the point, but he made another try. "Suppose somebody who hated Kendall, and plenty of people did, saw him walking around and got a bright idea — kill a dead man and nobody's going to look for the corpse. Just get it out of the way fast, and there won't even be an investigation."

"Could be," Dan said.

Willy let his thoughts wander into pleasanter channels, with dreams of Katie and her inheritance. Dan's voice broke into the reverie.

"Whoever did it should have been more careful," he said. "If he'd gone a little deeper into the woods and buried it in that quicksand, the body would never have been discovered. So why didn't he do just that?"

"Didn't know the area," Willy said.

"Or else he got all tired out luging the body," Dan said.

Willy was in a compromising mood. "Or both," he said.

Dan phoned bright and early the next morning. "Willy," he said, "maybe that Katie of yours had a good idea. A man like Kendall, he'd had practically every experience, he has enough dough to do anything he wants, he's an egomaniac to begin with — maybe he wants to know what people will think of him after he's dead.

"So he fakes his own death and holes up some place, with twenty grand to take care of himself for a while. Then he gets hold of his own obituary, bugs his own house and listens to what people say about him."

"Makes sense," Willy said, "but where was he?"

"Hiding nearby, maybe in a motel. I'll check in my area, but he could have been staying on the other side of the state line. I

thought you might check up in Le Page, so I'll send somebody over with a picture of Kendall to give you something to work on. Okay?"

"Okay," Willy said. "See you tonite."

It was the kind of work that he liked. Driving around leisurely, talking to people, seeing what was going on in his territory — he hoped he'd be at it all day and come up with nothing. Because this was Dan's case.

Let him locate Kendall's hide-out, if he had one. Let Dan question the suspects, if he could round them up. Then this evening he and Dan could talk things over. Meanwhile Willy did a kind of personal, public relations job, learnt a few interesting things and met a few interesting people. Or at least, unusual ones.

One of them was Marilyn Green, who ran the Hill Top Motel and overwhelmed her clients with a high, piercing voice that was unexpected in such a small, almost delicate person.

"Twenty bucks a night, and cheap at any price," she screamed to Willy as he drove up in his county car, with police markings that you could see a mile off. Then she burst out laughing.

"Chief Wharton in person," she shouted. "I got no violations, no suspicious characters, no stolen goods and nothing on my mind except love for the world, starting off with myself. So what do you want?"

Willy gazed down at her and enjoyed the sight. "Just trying to pick up some information," he said.

"What I know," she yelled, "I'll tell anybody. I got a clean conscience and a clean motel." And she erupted into the yowl of laughter with which she punctuated every other sentence.

Willy showed Kendall's picture. "Seen this man lately?"

"Oliver Oakum," she said promptly. "He spent his honeymoon here when my mother was running the place, and every year since then he and his wife spent their anniversary here. Or did, until she died, and now he comes alone. Why all the interest in him?"

"Because this is Oliver Kendall, who was shot some time yesterday. When did you last see him?"

"Yesterday morning," she shrieked, as if she were accusing Willy of some crime. "He'd checked in the day before and paid a week's rent ahead of time."

"His picture was in the paper," Willy said. "It was right there on the front page. Why didn't you tell the police he'd been staying here?"

"My mother taught me never to speak up unless I'm spoken to," Marilyn said, "and so I wait until I'm asked. I waited twelve years for a man to come along and ask me to marry him, and when he did, I said sure, why not, and maybe I should have said no and

saved myself a pound or two of heartache, but I didn't. So ask me anything and you'll get a straight answer." And she burst into her high-pitched laughter.

"Was he alone?"

"Yes. All alone."

"Anybody visit him?"

"I don't know. The one thing my clients get is privacy."

"Anybody phone him? Any messages?"

"Somebody called and asked if Oliver Oakum was here and what his room number was, and I told them."

"Them?"

"Him."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Let me have a key, and let me see the register."

The name, Oakum, was there, Room Number Eleven, and the license numbers of Kendall's car — OK-797.

Willy went out to the parking lot and saw the car, a blue, late model Cadillac. The keys were in the ignition and there were stains on the front seat which, to Willy's trained eye, were almost certainly blood.

He removed the ignition key, holding it by the thin edge in case there were prints on the flat surface. He slid a string through the hole in the key and, holding it suspended by the string, brought it back to his own car. Temporarily, until Dan got here, he looped the string over a prong under the

dashboard. Then he walked over to Room Eleven.

He stopped short at the door when he heard voices inside. He caught a few words, but they told him nothing except that at least three persons were inside and looking for something. "Not here . . . That's his bag all right . . . See this?"

Willy took hold of the knob, turned it and pushed the door open. The four people inside whirled, like children caught raiding a jam closet.

Carstairs, the man with the oversized head, was the only one that Willy recognized. Willy nodded at him and said to the others, "I'm Chief Wharton. Who are you?"

They identified themselves readily, and Willy sorted them out and put tags on them to stamp them in his memory. Josh Enright was the small, stringy man who moved awkwardly, with arthritic difficulty. Tom Kendall of the bushy mustache and tiny, deep-set eyes was twice Josh's weight but only an inch or two taller. Barbara Reading, Kendall's married daughter, had the nervous, perpetual smile of someone who was never quite sure of herself.

Carstairs, in a flat, squeaky voice that must have been a handicap to him as an attorney, explained their presence before Willy even asked his question.

"After I heard of Oliver's murder," he said, "I called Tom

and Barbara and Josh and asked them to come over to my office. We were all more or less close to him and I thought we might be able to pool our information and help out the investigation."

Willy couldn't help questioning the statement. "By not getting in touch with the police?" he said.

"We all knew of Oliver's sentimental journeys to the Hill Top," Carstairs said. "Pilgrimages, if you will, under the name of Oakum. Under the circumstances we decided to meet at my office this morning and drive over here."

"How did you get in without a key?"

"The door was open," Carstairs said.

"Why do you think Kendall hid here?"

Tom answered. "He used to say that his ambition was to attend his own funeral and read his own obituary. After the report of his death followed by his real death, and then the tape recorder set to pick up whatever we were liable to say about him — well, we all reached the same conclusion, that he'd bugged his own house."

"What," Willy said, "did any of you find here?"

Barbara Reading grinned. "Nothing," she said.

"What did any of you take?"

Her smile remained fixed. "Nothing," she said. "None of us. You came too soon."

"What did you expect to find?" Willy asked.

Carstairs answered. "These are my clients, and I wish to advise them that they have the right to remain silent and refuse to answer any questions that you may ask."

"What kind of questions do you think I'm going to ask?" Willy said, and Carstairs merely shrugged.

Willy walked over to the phone, picked it up and dialed the Morgan County police. "Dan?" he said. "Willy here. Better get over to the Hill Top Motel, because I think that whoever killed Kendall is here. Just a matter of sorting them out."

He put the phone down. "Now tell me where you found the money, and what you did with it."

Carstairs answered. "There was no money. We came to look for it because it belongs to the estate and we wanted to make sure that the estatee got it."

Willy nodded. "Of course," he said quietly. "Four high-minded citizens bent on preserving the assets of an estate." He picked up the phone again and called the office. "Marilyn? Would you come over to Eleven for a few minutes? He held the receiver at arm's length, in order to protect his ear drums.

She arrived promptly. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, looking around. "What's happening? This is a quiet place, we don't cater to conventions." And her laugh seemed to cut through the walls of the twenty-

nine rooms of the Hill Top Motel, and sailed out over the countryside.

Nobody responded even with a smile. Willy introduced the four people formally, one by one, and made sure that each of them acknowledged the introduction with a word or two. Then he turned to Marilyn.

"You heard them speak," he said. "You heard their voices. Which one of them phoned you and asked for Oakum's room number?"

She pointed to Josh. "Him," she said. "The puny one."

"I was in Carstairs' office," Josh said immediately. "He told me to find out."

There was fury in Carstairs' squeak as he addressed Josh. "I'll do the talking," he said. "I'm the attorney for this group."

Willy motioned towards the door. "Do your arguing outside," he said, "while I look around in here."

He found nothing, nor did Dan after he arrived, and they discussed the matter at the Right Side bar that evening.

"The motive," Willy said, "was twenty grand, less what he paid a body snatcher up in —"

"Lake Minnequantassett," Dan said quickly.

"Yeah. They knew about the money because they'd seen his check book, they admitted that much. He'd told all of them at one time or another that he wanted to

read his own obituary, so they all guessed he was alive. I think they all knew about the tape recorder up there in the attic and faked their surprise when Richie came in. So — which one of the four?"

"Not an ironclad alibi in the lot," Dan said. "I've been checking up. Any one of them could have driven over to the motel, invited Kendall for a ride, killed him and gotten back to where they'd come from. It would be cutting things pretty fine, but it could have been done in a half hour."

"What about the people in the motel?" Willy asked. "Didn't anybody see Kendall leave?"

"Several people did, and they all say he left alone."

"He could have picked up his killer later on. But who brought the car back? Whoever it was, wasn't he seen? Didn't people notice that car come in?"

Dan leaned back contentedly. "I've spoken to everybody who was in the motel that night, some of them personally, some of them by phone. There's only one time when the parking lot wasn't in full view of everybody, and that was about eleven o'clock when the laundry truck came. What with its size and with the noise it makes, a car could come into the parking lot without being noticed. Any other time, it's hard to think that somebody wouldn't have remembered that blue Cadillac."

"What are you looking so pleased about?" Willy asked.

"Somebody did. A man named Leon Leonard told me over the phone that he saw the car come back and he could identify the occupant." Dan smiled with the satisfied smile of an attorney telling his client that the jury had just come in with a heavy verdict in his favor. "I'm meeting him at the motel at ten o'clock," Dan said. "Like to come along?"

They waited in Marilyn's office, nervously, as you wait for a plane that's unaccountably late. They spoke of the case, and they spoke of the people who'd been in the motel on the night before Kendall's murder, and Marilyn shouted out her motel-owner's problems and bragged about her quick, instinctive decisions as to whom to turn away, and why.

"I spot them every time," she said. "The noisy ones, the blanket-stealers, the ones with stolen credit cards. Maybe I should have been a cop, maybe I can help you on this case."

"Not much to it any more," Dan said. "This Leonard identifies, and that's what detection usually is. Leonard says he saw the guy, and he'll point out which one of these it was." And he held up the pictures of the four suspects.

Leonard arrived about quarter past ten. He was a short, squat man with a short, squat beard, and what was behind it was anybody's guess.

He came to the point at once. "Show me the pictures," he said.

"I'll know; I never forget a face."

Dan spread out the pictures, Carstairs, Josh, Thomas Kendall and Barbara Reading. "I told you it was a man," Leonard said, "but it's none of these." Then he walked to the door, stared outside and jerked up suddenly.

"*There!*" he exclaimed. "There's the car, just parking, and the man in it — he's the one!"

Dan and Willy watched what he was pointing to, and exchanged looks. "That's a Chevy," Willy said, "and the man in it is a police officer. He came to help make the arrest."

Leonard turned around and lowered his head. "I came all the way," he said, almost sobbing. "I wanted to help. I thought —"

"It's all right," Dan said. "Marilyn can put you up for the night. Just get a good sleep and go home tomorrow."

In the glum silence that followed, Marilyn's voice sounded sharply. "Sit down, both of you," she said, "and we'll have a drink. Maybe I can still help."

"How?" Dan asked.

She didn't answer until the three of them were sitting around a table in her anteroom and she'd poured out the drinks. Then she leaned forward and whispered, "I know who did it."

Willy got up and closed the door. Cranks, he kept thinking. Cranks like Leonard, who dream up impossible theories and false identifications. Was Marilyn

going to offer up more of the same?

He glanced past her, and through the rear window of her bedroom he noticed a car, a yellow convertible parked just outside. Then he glanced at Dan. His expression showed that he, too, expected no more from Marilyn than they'd gotten from Leonard. Marilyn and her intuitions — that's all they'd get from her.

"Josh killed him," she said, lowering her voice for the first time. "He came here the day before yesterday to play chess with Oliver. They played the way they always did, hating to lose, hating each other, and ending up with an argument, just like they always did.

"Yesterday morning when Oliver left, he must have met Josh. I can't tell you exactly what happened, I wasn't there, but —" She hesitated and took a deep breath. "But I saw him bring Oliver's car back. And he was alone!"

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Dan asked.

"I hated to accuse him, because —" And again she hesitated.

Willy finished the sentence for her. " — Because you know he didn't do it," he said. "You did."

"You're joking," she said, and she laughed. And laughed some more. And then she saw the expression on Willy's face, and her laughter stopped suddenly.

"You're not serious," she said. "You can't be."

"You killed him," Willy said, "and dragged his body into the woods, but you weren't strong enough to take it very far, or to dig a deep enough grave. After you killed him, you brought his car back here and left it behind the motel. That's the only place it could have been left without being noticed. Then, some time during the night, you brought it out to the parking lot, where we found it."

"Anybody could have done that," she said.

"You knew him too well, well enough to know about that chess rivalry and how they argued with each other."

"I happened to hear about that, somewhere."

"You were having an affair with Kendall," Willy said. "That's why he kept coming here after his wife died. Sentimental? Him? Never! He came here to see *you*. Now tell me why you killed him."

Marilyn started to get up, then slumped back as if the effort were too much. Her fingers played with a jeweled clasp that closed her blouse at the V.

"*This!*" she said, squeezing the broach. "He gave it to me and told me it was solid gold, and it's just junk. He was mean and arrogant, all he ever cared about was himself. He used me and kept insulting me, he told me he wasn't even leaving me a cent. Nothing

at all. So when everybody thought he was dead, it was a perfect chance to do just that. He deserved to be killed and I'm glad I did it. I'm glad, *glad!*"

"What did you do with the money?" Willy asked.

"I threw it away," she said, speaking barely above a whisper, "because it's wrong to steal, isn't it?"

But all right to kill? Willy thought, and he shuddered. Then he made the formal arrest.



Mike Shayne Presents

Next Issue's Headliners

SEVEN TO DIE by BRETT HALLIDAY
The New Mike Shayne Complete Novelet

HIGH AND DRY by PATRICK SCAFFETTI
A "Different" Story of Unbearable Suspense

GET RICH QUICK by ERNEST SAVAGE

COLD DEAL by MOSS TADRACK

THE PRIVATE EAR by JEAN DARLING

THE PRO by ROBERT H. CURTIS

Cause of Death

by M.G. OGAN

Clovis Crandall was a man who deserved to be killed. But Jerry Madsen was hardly the man to run down the killer. Like everyone else who knew the dead man, Jerry hated the dead man.

CLOVIS CRANDALL HAD put the key into the lock of the tool shed door, humming to himself.

"Crandall?" The voice was a hoarse whisper.

The tall man jerked around, dropping the spade he carried.

"You! What in hell . . . ?"

The three reports were no louder than handclaps but slugs from the Ruger Marksman target pistol punched three holes in his broad forehead.

Crandall was dead before he hit the ground with his key chain still

swinging from the key in the toolshed lock.

I had checked out for my two weeks annual vacation from the Homicide Bureau of the Monroe City Police Department. But I went back to my desk for a road map I'd forgotten.

That was a mistake, because the phone rang.

"Detective Sergeant Madsen here." I thought it would be the garage calling to say my roadster wouldn't be ready tomorrow morning.



"Jerry?" It was Sheriff Matt Turnbull calling from Ferris County. Three years ago I'd resigned as his chief deputy to come to Monroe City. "Glad I caught you."

"You just did, Matt." I'd read about the Crandall murder in

yesterday's newspaper. He'd taken my job when I left the department. "If you want me back on the job in Ferrisville it's thanks, but no thanks."

"That isn't why I called."

I suspected why he'd called. "Matt, I'm on my vacation."

"Stuff your vacation." Now Matt sounded more like the man I knew. "You owe me, Jerry. I intend to collect."

Matt's slightly perjured testimony had saved me from a manslaughter rap. When a strung-out addict I knew was armed reached, I shot and killed him. How was I to know he just wanted to blow his nose?"

"Okay Matt. What do you want?"

"You down here tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"I need an outsider to carry on the investigation of the Crandall killing. I'd just fired him because he filed to run against me in the election next month. We had words. It's being whispered I killed him."

"My car's in the paint shop. If it's ready, I'll be down there tomorrow morning. Did you kill him?"

Matt chuckled. "That's for you to find out."

My car was ready. When I'd driven the fifty miles from Monroe City to Ferrisville, Matt was waiting for me in his office. Age hadn't shrunk his big frame too much but he was grayer than I remembered.

"It happened on Wednesday night," Matt said while I was still pulling up a chair. This was Saturday morning. "Clovis moved out to the old Crandall place at the end of Six Mile Road when his wife back. Whoever did it nailed him

while he was putting his tools away."

"I'd heard Doris left him."

"She came back. Her story is that she was watching television when she heard the shots, looked out, saw Clovis on the ground, locked up and called us. I believe her. Some don't."

"She didn't check to see if he was dead or just wounded?"

"No. She was scared. It's a pretty remote area out there. Crandall still had a house here in town but he liked to make a garden." Matt looked thoughtful. "I give it to him he was a good cop, but I never should have made him chief deputy. Maybe he'd be alive if I hadn't. But hell — you knew Clovis."

"We weren't close."

Matt chuckled. "That's an understatement." Then, "You and Doris were always friendly. Didn't you go to school with her?"

"High school."

"Where were you when she married Crandall?"

"Away — in the army. Who went out on the call?"

"Dick Tracy."

Tracy Allen is one of Matt's black deputies, a wiry little man faintly resembling the cartoon detective. I stuck him with that nickname.

"I'll need help. Can I use him?"

"Sure. Save your car. Take a cruiser."

"Thanks."

"Jerry, go easy with Doris.

She's gone through a lot. The woman deserved better than Crandall."

"She chose him but I'll go easy."

The courthouse parking lot was jammed with traffic when Tracy and I went out. I had to get sunglasses from my car.

"Court day is always like this," Tracy said. "Nice green car you've got."

"A dozen more payments and I'll own it."

I let Tracy drive the cruiser out Six Mile Road.

"How did you happen to go out on call?" I asked. "Aren't you day shift?"

"Right but checks were late. I came back to pick mine up. the dispatcher sent me because Garritty and Hardy were on night patrol down near Old Man Evans place. He'd called in that someone was after his hogs."

"I caught Chip Burnett butchering one of his hogs in the swamp. Son of a bitch tried to kill me. What ever became of him?"

"Got chopped down with a double-butt axe a year ago. Some argument in a country store over in the next county. That was one bad nigger."

"What happened to the chopper?"

"Justifiable homicide. Chip was skunk drunk and came at him with a knife. Two witnesses, one black, one white. Right along here is where I passed Mac Furlow in his

pickup that night. His old pickup damn near put me in the ditch."

"They still let Mac drive?"

"Who's going to stop him? His son in law is the drivers' license examiner."

"Mac see or hear anything?"

"Nope, but that don't mean much. Mac is deaf as a post these days. We never did find out what he was doing out here."

"Whoever killed Crandall should have been coming like a bat out of hell. You should have met him."

Tracy shook his head. "Not the way they have it figured. You know that old fishing pier where this road deadends at the river? Cappy brought his bloodhounds out here next morning. The bitch sniffed a trail from the tool shed to that pier. The other dog chased squirrels. Cappy was sore as hell."

"Do they figure he came and left by the river?"

"Looks like it." He pointed to a culvert ahead. Beyond it was one of those postage-stamp-size picnic areas. "Only car I saw was a yellow job parked in there. Neckers probably. My siren must have scared them. Saw them pull out after I passed."

"Did you report it?"

"Sure. Do you know how many yellow roadsters are registered in this county? You wouldn't believe. Still, Sheriff Turnbull had us check them all."

"Matt's careful."

Tracy stayed in the car when we reached the Crandall place.

Clovis had had an investment here. Neat fences, an old barn converted to a two-car garage, a cement drive, a small house freshly painted, behind the garage one of those aluminum buildings he used for a toolshed.

Doris Crandall had heard us drive up and was waiting for me on the porch. She'd changed. There was a streak of gray in her auburn hair now. Her face was still pretty but closed up.

"Really you, Jerry?"

"No one else. Matt called me."

Her hand was firm and cool in mine. "I'm glad. Come on in. I was just making coffee. What about your partner?"

"He'll wait in the car."

I followed Doris through the house to the kitchen. The coffee was ready and she poured me a cup. "Do you still take yours black?"

"Right. You still make good coffee."

"Thank you." Doris sat down across the table from me. "Do you think I killed Clovis?"

"No."

"God knows I had reason. He was perverted." Tears stood in her eyes but she blinked them back. "I'd left him you know. He wanted me back until after the election. I fell for it. I really didn't have much choice."

"Where were you?"

"With another man. Clovis

found us and threatened him and me. He left. I came back. Not exactly a pretty story, is it?"

"I've heard worse. What will you do when this mess is cleaned up?"

"Go to my sister in California and start a new life. Do you remember Alice?"

"Faintly. She was ahead of us in school, wasn't she?"

That's right. She has two children now."

Doris smiled, but it was a tired smile that didn't touch her dark eyes.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"That you'd forgotten all about us. But then that isn't why you're here, is it? Did you ever get my letter? It didn't come back."

"What letter? I've moved a few times lately. The postal service never caught up with me, I guess. When did you write?"

"After I came back to Clovis but never mind. It isn't important now."

"I wish it was," I said and finished my coffee. I got up to leave. "You should have someone staying out here with you, Doris."

"Half the women in this county think I murdered Clovis."

"I'll get this investigation cleaned up as fast as I can," I promised. "Give me the address of your sister in California."

"You don't look good, man," Tracy said when I rejoined him.

"I've felt better. Let's go."

"Learn anything?" Tracy asked when he was driving.

"Yes. Tell me about Crandall and Matt."

"Sheriff Turnbull's been in office twenty years and was ready to step down until he learned Crandall planned to fire me, Garrity and Hardy if he got himself elected. That tore it. They had a hell of a fight. You know the sheriff when it comes to protecting his men."

"I know him. Let's go see Old Man Evans."

We were passing the picnic area. Two cars were parked there now. The people had gone down the trail through the woods that led to the river.

"Maybe the owner of that yellow car was stringing cat hooks, Tracy."

He shrugged. "Could be, but I figure kids making out. Makes more sense."

Old Man Evans lives on a farm his ancestors carved out of the swamp more than a hundred years ago. He's pushing ninety. When he goes, the swamp will reclaim the land.

"Remember me?" I asked.

He was sitting on his sagging front porch chewing tobacco. "Nope." Faded blue eyes studied my face. "Why should I?"

"Never mind. You called the sheriff a couple of nights ago about someone stealing your hogs."

He came alive. "Damned depu-

ties never even came here! Every last one of my hogs is gone. It ain't like it used to be. Once a young fellow came out here and caught a nigger killing one of my hogs. No offense," he said to Tracy. "I know the difference between a negro and a nigger."

Tracy grinned. "None taken. I know a honkie from a white man."

"I been meaning to speak to Matt about it," Old Man Evans finished.

"I'll do it for you," I promised.

In the car driving back to Ferrisville, I said, "Did Garrity and Hardy come out to the Crandall farm that night?"

"They sure did and in a hurry."

"How soon after you got there?"

"Wasn't watching the time." Tracy had gone sullen. "Half an hour maybe."

Fast driving could have gotten them from where we were to the Crandall farm in half an hour. But they hadn't been this way to see Old Man Evans unless his memory was shot.

"They could have done it," I said.

"You're thinking crazy, man!" Tracy's flare of temper told me he was having the same thought. "Pat Garrity and Mike Hardy ain't killers. You've worked with them longer than I have. You ought to know that much."

"Garrity's got a retarded kid, Hardy's wife is an invalid. All they know is police work and both are

coming up to retirement. When a man's killed like Clovis was, motive counts."

"I've got a wife and kid. This is the first decent job I ever got. Put me on your list."

"I asked for you, Tracy, because you're the only deputy who couldn't have killed Crandall. You were in the department when he was shot."

"Lucky me!"

Garrity and Hardy were in the parking lot coming off duty. I'd checked the dispatcher's log. They'd called in that they'd seen Old Man Evans.

"Got a minute, fellows?" I said.

Shoulder to shoulder they faced me. We'd been friendly once, but this was now. When your investigation includes fellow officers, the fence goes up.

"The night Crandall was killed, did you see Old Man Evans about his hogs?"

"I've just talked with him this afternoon."

Garrity flushed.

"Okay, Jerry." Mike Hardy was talking. "We didn't go out there. Make a federal case out of it. Old Man Evans no longer has any hogs."

"So he told me."

"Bet he didn't remember to tell you he sold them all a month ago," Garrity said. "I've got one in my deep freeze right now. On our day off, Hardy and me helped him get them to market."

"Where were you when Cran-

dall was killed?"

"Parked behind that damned roadhouse on Pecan Road." Hardy hesitated. "Having a short beer."

"If you have to, can you prove that?" I asked.

They looked at each other. It was Pat Garrity who answered. "Reckon not. You'll have to take our word for it."

I found Matt in his office cleaning one of the riot guns from the rack behind his desk. He peered through the barrel, snapped the action shut, swung his chair around and racked the gun.

"How does it go?" he asked over his shoulder.

I slouched in a chair. "How much of a search did you make for the weapon that killed Crandall?"

"We found the ejected shells, so we know it was some make of target pistol. We covered the ground looking for the gun."

"I think it's still out there. Whoever killed Crandall knew his business. He'd get rid of the weapon fast. I'd guess his car was parked out there by the fishing pier. Cutting through the woods, he dropped the gun, got in his car, saw Tracy coming along Six Mile Road, pulled off into the picnic area and doused his lights."

Matt was listening intently.

"When the road was clear, he just drove away."

"That gun is probably at the bottom of the river now."

"I don't think so," I said.

Matt slumped in his chair and

tented his hands. "I've a fishing camp down river aways from the Crandall farm. I keep a boat there. I was fishing that night, or at least that's my story. No witnesses to say I was or wasn't."

"So you're suspect. You told me that before I came down here. I'm going out in the morning to look for that weapon."

"I'm puzzled, Jerry."

"About what?"

"I've a hunch you're going to find that weapon and it will tell us something."

"Maybe," was the only answer I could give him then.

I spent two hours browsing around in the woods between the farm and the fishing pier the next morning. Doris wasn't home. I left a note telling her she could start packing for California before I drove back to Ferrisville.

I laid the Ruger Marksman on Matt's desk and saw his eyebrows shoot up.

"I checked the clip. Three shots fired."

"Where did you find it?"

"In a hollow tree. I think we were supposed to find it."

"Why?"

"That's the weapon stolen off the front seat of Crandall's car just before I left here," I said. "You can check the numbers but I'm sure it is. Remember the chewing out you gave him about being careless?"

"Damned if I don't think you're right. Court was in session. De-



fendants, lawyers, witnesses all over the place." Matt was catching my drift. "Some con Clovis put inside that day with his testimony took it, got out recently, came back to get revenge."

"You can take it from here, Matt," I said.

Which he did. Crandall testified against three men that day. One was dead now, another still inside, the third man released just before Clovis was killed had left the state. An A.P.B. bulletin never found him. So the Crandall killing is still an open file but gathering dust.

I've destroyed the letter from Doris crying for my help. I hate the hurry-up paint job done on my yellow roadster but I'm trading it next week for a new car.

I've written Doris I'm coming to California on my vacation this year.

The Peace Monger

by JAMES McKIMMEY

To the world, Raymond Sethwick was a towering figure, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

But beneath the wildly facade lurked an egomaniac heedless of others, willing to kill if pressed.

RAYMOND SETHWICK DROVE his new sedan northward from San Francisco, through the wine country, on toward hills warmed by spring sunshine, where Sethwick's selected town of Pure Lake lay. The town was home to him, now, as it had been since the time, three years ago, when he and his late wife, Dolores, had moved there after carefully and judiciously

accessing its peace and quiet—a time not many weeks after Sethwick had been given the Nobel Peace Prize.

His last book, *Peace At Any Cost*, had contained the power to carry him, finally, over the summit. His winning the Prize had been, he knew well enough, a rightful and well-deserved acquisition.



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To the casual observer Sethwick looked the very symbol of the peace he had so assiduously studied, judged, written and spoken about, for all these past years. Kindly-appearing in general, neatly dressed in a conservative three-piece suit, he was lean, tall and, with his grey hair—he'd had it styled in San Francisco, as he did every three or four weeks when he visited that city to deliver a lecture—he often reminded people of an autumn-yered Henry Fonda.

But right now, despite the predictable success of his latest speech on the virtues of a disciplined worldwide peace, he was beginning to tense as he approached Pure Lake, feeling the first edges of anger, thinking about them. Those youthful savages who had intruded upon his personal peace, as he had grown to know it, in that compact but splendid lakeside home on the outer limits of town, purchased with money he'd gotten as the result of winning The Prize.

Yes, he thought, as he drove, as the sun lowered and the hills turned golden, savages they were, who had moved in next door—youthful, shouting, laughing, insensitive, beer-drinking, pill-popping, God-knew-what-else savages. There seemed no other label for them, because they owned not the slightest vestige of what could be properly labeled civilized man. And why, in the

name of justice, had *he*, Raymond Sethwick, been the recipient of becoming their neighbor?

It was crude. It was unbelievable. It was ghastly!

Then he was nearing Pure Lake, driving in dusk. He rounded the southern limits of the town. At last, as he came within a mile of his house—or so it seemed, at any rate—he could hear, even over the sound of his car's engine, the blasting of rock music as it was powered through the speakers of that infernal stereo machine in The House Next Door.

The sound grew in volume as he neared his home—as did Sethwick's anger and resentment. He could see both houses now, in the dimming light, on this bank of the lake after which the small resort town had been named. There were other lake-front dwellings scattered along the rounding shore.

But a moratorium had been clamped on further building by large and powerful environmental groups. So existing dwellings were spaced well apart from each other, beside the water—all but Sethwick's and the house next to it.

As Sethwick guided his sedan toward the garage of his house, he carefully examined both structures, with the music—if it might be called that—punishing his eardrums. They were identical houses, except that each had a reverse floor plan from the other.

Building for both had begun with a spacious garage at street

level, then rose two stories, with a wooden deck protruding from the second floor, over the water, supported by pilings that thrust down deeply into the lake and its bed.

Sethwick had given considerable thought to the proximity of that twin structure next to the one he purchased, before the transaction was consummated. It had then been occupied by a kind and gentle man named Albert Fenster, who had owned the lake-front property, who had built both houses, one to live in, one to sell at a profit sufficient to pay for the other.

Sethwick had indeed projected to the problems involved, should an undesirable eventually occupy the second twin home. But Albert Fenster, and his wife, perfect neighbors, content to remain to themselves, except for an occasional cheery hello or good morning, had seemed entirely durable. So Sethwick had made his decision and bought the house next to that of the one retained by Albert Fenster.

But, Sethwick thought, running his sedan into the garage below his home, he should have considered more seriously the cruel fancies of fate. Just as he had not expected to lose his own wife, a year ago, he had not expected Albert Fenster's wife suddenly to have died. Not anymore than he had expected Fenster himself to have fallen apart, physically, that

he was now in a rest home, with his house rented out to those savages...

Sethwick braked the car, turned off the ignition, removed the key and got out to shut the garage door. Then he paused, for a few moments, thinking suddenly of the death of his wife, Dolores. The reflection seemed odd—he had seldom thought of her since she'd been buried and the news of her death had generated around the world.

But that night, nearly a year ago, was again alive in his mind. He remembered quite accurately how it had been, then.

The night had been as cool as this one was getting. And he, in the study that opened onto the second-story deck of this house, had been reading, concentrating deeply, caring not, really, that Dolores had gone off by herself again. Ever since he had won The Prize, Dolores, jealous of his zenithing prominence, resentful of her own rather meaningless role in the large scope of things, had taken to driving off in her small car to bars and heavy drinking.

At first, he had gone looking for her, somehow getting her home when he found her. She had begun stealing his car keys to prevent such pursuit. With his intellect, it had taken him but little time to learn how to start his sedan without an ignition key, using, instead, equipment purchased for that purpose.

But at last he had given up the effort as hopeless. When she returned, in what condition, in those situations, no longer interested him. After all, he would be returning to the university lecture circuit in the fall. He had early discovered that Nobel Prize winners, like popular musicians and professional athletes, drew their female admirers.

No, he had not worried about Dolores' absence, that night. And when he was properly weary, he had gone to bed alone to sleep quite peacefully—until awakened by that acrid odor coming from an open ventilator, whose system—either for heat or air-conditioning—began below, in the garage.

He recognized it immediately as exhaust fumes, and got up quickly to hurry down and find the poor, sad Dolores slumped in the car with the engine running and the garage door shut. He had turned off the ignition and thrown the garage door open, then switched on the lights.

After that he had bent over his wife, to make certain that she was dead, obviously a suicide. And he had then found the note clutched in her cooling hand.

He removed it and smoothed it, realizing that she had scrawled the message in whatever bar she last visited. It read:

You are a fake, Sethwick. A momolithic fraud. You've never truly sought peace, only fame.

Your only love has been you. I'm shed of you, Mr. Monster. Goodby and farewell.

He had read that and immediately accepted it for what it was—a pitiable and final attempt to rationalize her own uselessness by further denunciation of him. Then he had stuffed the note into a pocket, to destroy later, which he did.

There had been speculation as to Dolores having committed suicide, in the media, after he notified the police of her discovery.

There had been speculation as to Dolores having committed suicide, in the media, after he notified the police of her discovery. But he had publicly insisted that, in his own mind, it was no such thing.

She had simply had too much to drink—yes, he'd had to admit, she'd been drinking far too much—had driven her car into the garage, left the engine running, then gotten out and closed the door, after which she'd fallen back into the car, making her death the unfortunate accident, it was officially declared.

Nearly a year ago...why, he asked himself, was he replaying that night now?

Then he heard the sound of music from next door crashing through the walls. He realized that there had been a short interval of silence, which allowed him the reflection on Dolores' pitiful

passing. The tape in the stereo over there had apparently run out. But now another was running and bedlam resumed.

Sethwick walked upstairs with his overnight bag, through the kitchen, then continued upward to the top floor. In a bedroom that had always been solely his, he changed to old slacks, a sports shirt, a rumpled sweater with suede patches at the elbows. Since his early twenties he'd conceived the apparel to be proper casual home wear for any successful intellectual.

Then he went into the large study, where sliding glass doors opened to a deck above the water of the lake. The study was walled by shelves of books. The furniture was made of old mahogany and leather. There was a telephone on Sethwick's broad executive desk which could be rung only if you knew his unlisted number. There was, of course, his own stereo.

He stood motionless in the room for a moment, listening to the horrendous music blasting away next door. Now, too, he could hear their voices as they sat out on a deck matching Sethwick's. They did not speak to one another, they shouted.

He cleared his throat, seeking calm, then went to his own stereo to set up a comfortable interlude of Shostakovich. He kept turning up the volume to cover the hard rock invading his walls, from the house beside his. When he felt he had

succeeded, he picked up a book from a shelf—Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, always relaxing re-reading, for him—and sat down in his favorite chair.

He began reading, but the Shostakovich was so dreadfully loud that he could not remotely concentrate. He got up, feeling a pulsing in his temples, and switched off his own music to find it again replaced by nerve-shredding acid rock.

He threw down his book and marched to the glass doors leading to the deck. He slid open a door and stepped outside, and looked across at the other deck, which was illuminated by light flowing from the interior of that other house.

Was it five of them, over there? Six? No, seven young animals, right now. All male, all in their twenties, all shirtless with bulging, flexing muscles, sprawled on deck furniture, each with beer can in hand, roaring mindlessly at each other as the music from within rippled into the night.

Sethwick felt himself beginning to tremble with anger. He, too, was illuminated by the interior lighting of his own house. But they indicated not the slightest recognition that he was standing there, glaring across at them. But, then he thought furiously, they had never recognized his presence in any way whatever.

They did not work at jobs. Mostly, they did what they were

doing now, until perhaps four or five in the morning, when they would finally go inside and turn off the infernal music and presumably go to bed. They awoke in the early afternoon and would then, one or two or three of them, leave the house in a powerful sports car.

They would then return, with a mighty roar, tires shrieking as brakes were applied—restocked with food and six-packs. There would then follow an interval of perhaps two hours of relative peace, when car after car would stop outside their rented house, the occupants hurrying inside and then out again, within minutes. Finally, what was happening right now would begin anew...

How to stop them! Sethwick thought. *'How to silence them!*

And so—even though he realized the complete futility of it—he opened his mouth and shouted at them. He called them vile, obscene names. He ordered them to silence. He degraded their heritage and their ancestors.

But not one of them did so much as glance in his direction. In his mind, he saw an objective picture of himself doing what he was doing—a fifty-eight-year-old man standing on that deck, his mouth shaped in an O as he shouted uselessly into the night air, the sound of his voice overridden entirely by the noise from the other house. He was a silly caricature of an aging man become impotent by the care-

lessness of youth and their beastly excuse for music.

He quit the effort and returned to his study, sliding the glass door shut behind him, an action which subdued the invading noise only slightly.

He drew the back of a hand across his chin and felt the hand trembling. Then he walked to his desk which supported the telephone. He sat down and flipped through a number file, then lifted that phone.

Moments later he was speaking to a woman he judged to be an officer in the local police department. He spoke to her rapidly, realizing that ill-disguised frenzy was making his words nearly incomprehensible.

"Do you *understand?*" he finished.

"Your neighbors are making noise," the woman said with apparent disdain. "Is that it?"

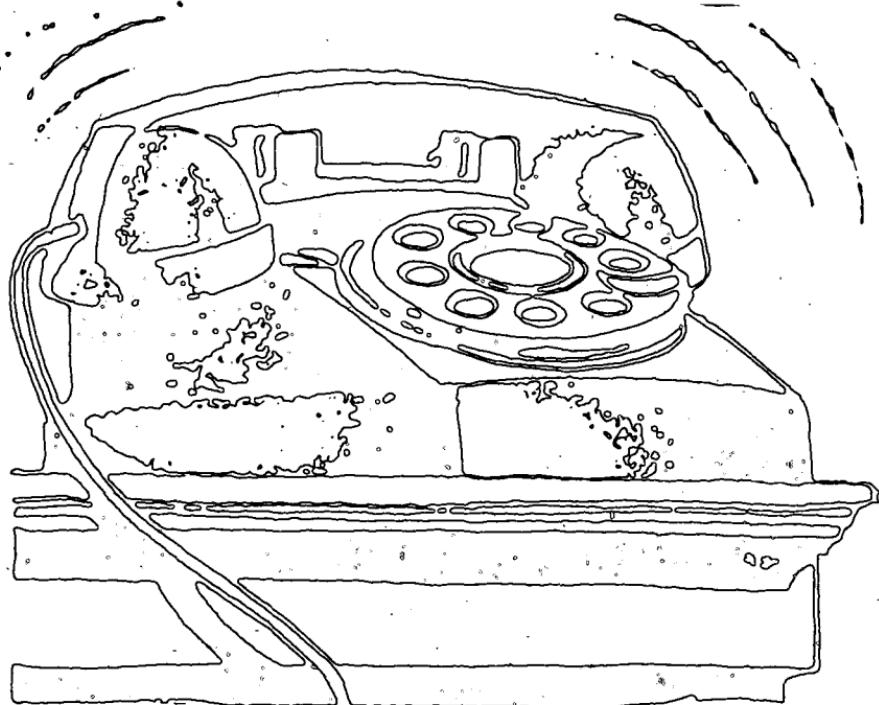
"That's it! Now what are you people going to do!"

"Sir, this is an emergency number! If you are merely complaining about your neighbors —"

"I tell you this *is* an emergency! I tell you —"

"Get off the line, sire. This number is exclusively for emergencies!"

Sethwick took a long breath, gathering control of his wits. He'd chosen the small city of Pure Lake entirely on the basis of its physical and geographical attraction. The locals, however, had, from the



beginning, proven themselves, in his mind, if not his late wife's, to be nothing more than small-town bumpkins. He had never made any effort whatsoever to hide his disdain of them. He was, after all, a winner of The Prize. And they were . . . well, nothing. And that was certainly being proven now.

"Do you know with whom you are speaking?" Sethwick said into the mouthpiece, able to speak more clearly now.

"Someone who's tying up the emergency line," the woman said with irritation.

"I am Raymond Sethwick," he pronounced archly.

"Oh," the woman said. Then finally, "That's who, huh?"

"That's who, *huh!*" Sethwick stated. "Now will you please put me on with the Chief of Police of this town!"

"He's home," said the woman flatly.

"Then phone him up and inform him that I wish to speak to him. I shall give you my private number." He did that and waited for her response.

"All right," the woman said at last. "I will, if you'll get off the

emergency line."

Sethwick hung up and leaned back, rubbing his neck now. Tension, inflamed by the roar of the yelling and music from next door, had locked the muscles at the base of his skull. Sethwick was looking at a grandfather's clock, and he noted that it was seven minutes before his telephone rang.

He lifted it, saying, "Raymond Sethwick here."

"Chief Emil Harold here," said a rather high, rasping voice.

"Did the woman tell you my problem, Chief?" Sethwick asked accusingly.

"It's a common enough problem," the Chief said coldly. "And most people usually take care of such things on their own."

"Oh, they do, do they!"

"Did you ask them to cool it? Before running to us?"

Sethwick closed his eyes and then opened them. "I don't believe you're vaguely aware of the situation as it truly exists, next door."

"That's possibly because I have not been aware of *any* problem over there, until now."

"Well, let me apprise you then, sir!"

"Apprise me! I was in the middle of dinner, you know!"

"They," said Sethwick carefully, "are a gang of dangerous, law-defying demons! And I want something done about them!"

"If we tried to do something about every bunch of kids who

play their music too loud, we'd have to arrest half the town! What do you mean by dangerous, anyway?"

"They're dealing in drugs!"

"What makes you think that?"

Slowly, precisely, Sethwick explained the stream of cars stopping briefly next door every afternoon. "Now what does that mean to you, Chief? What else could it possibly be but drug traffic? Those people have no other visible means of support do they? And that house can't be rented cheap, I'll tell you that!"

"Can you prove the drug business, Mr. Sethwick?"

"That's not up to me! That's up to you!"

"Well, we don't have any such proof. We don't have a *thing*, regarding anybody in that house! Mr. Sethwick, you're such a big shot . . . all right, then such an educated man, that you should know we can act only within the law. And if there's no evidence of your accusation, we simply cannot act!"

"Well, then get the evidence! Turn it over to your narcotics detail!"

"I would, but he's on vacation!"

"Do you mean you have *one man* acting as a narcotics detail?" Sethwick asked with incredulity.

There was silence, then finally the police chief said, "Mr. Sethwick, this is a small town. One where I've lived all of my life.

Now, you have come in here from the outside. As far as I know, you did that of your own free will, because I certainly don't know that anybody *asked* you to move to Pure Lake! And I say you're going to have to be content with the way we do things here!"

"Well, I'm *not* content with it! I want those people next door shut up!"

"For a man who spouts peace, you've got a loud voice, Mr. Sethwick!"

Again, Sethwick gathered up his will to control his emotions. "I am a man of peace, sir," he went on, more quietly. "And that is why I am directing my complaint to you, an officer of the law. Would you expect me to get into a fist fight with those people next door? Eh? Or are you finally going to start cooperating with me? And, as a defender of the law —"

"Mr. Sethwick," the other man said pointedly, "I think we have cooperated quite well with you, in the past. I'm talking specifically about the unfortunate death of your wife, a year ago. We could have pressed on with that, you know. We knew well enough what that *really* was — your wife talked to enough people before she passed on, you know. And —"

"Bartenders?" Sethwick replied scathingly.

"I'm simply saying to you, sir, that we did not rule that a suicide because we thought it wasn't. Instead, we ruled it an *accident*, to

save this town of ours from further snooping and probing and sniffing out by outsiders!

"We'd have had the big-city news media all over this place for months, if we hadn't shut that down the way we did. It wouldn't have been good for business — people come here to *relax!* You should be grateful for what we did, Mr. Sethwick, because it helped save your reputation!"

"Talk about relaxing! Who can do it? Anyway, how did my late wife get into this! I'm talking about those animals next door, those *dope fiends!* I want them silenced. And now!" Sethwick was vaguely aware that he was actually seeing a red film of rage. "Is there *no* one who owns a semblance of civic responsibility in this excuse for a town! Starting with Albert Fenster, who *rented* his house to those savages in the first place!"

"Now don't you start maligning Al Fenster!" the chief said, his voice trembling now. "He's sick, in a rest home. He *needs* the income he can get out of renting that house. I've known Al Fenster all my life. I grew up with him. We've been lodge brothers for thirty years! We were together in the Town Boosters for just as long! Who do you think you *are*, criticizing Al Fenster, especially when he's down and out in a rest home!"

Sethwick brought the palm of a hand slowly across his forehead.

"What are you going to do about those monsters next door? That's the singular question. *What*, I ask you!"

"Why don't you just sit there and wait and *see* what we're going to do!"

SETHWICK SAT THERE for some time, knowing, of course, that the police department of Pure Lake, California, was going to do nothing whatever about this insane madness next door. He got up once and went out to look at them on their deck.

Then, his heart beating faster, he returned to his desk and telephone, which he dialed once more. He had never wanted to communicate with them directly. But there seemed no other recourse now. He leaned back as the ringing began. He had dialed Albert Fenster's number, assuming the savages next door had kept the same one.

Someone finally answered. He knew, by the stereo sound flowing through the receiver of the telephone, that it was indeed One Of Them, From Over There.

"Yeah?" said the voice.

"I want you to stop the noise you are making over there and do it immediately!"

"Why?" came the unruffled reply. The savage sounded just thick-voiced enough to indicate that he had reached space.

"Because you are invading privacy and disturbing the peace!"

"Who says so?"
"I say so!"
"Who're you?"

"The man next door! Raymond Sethwick! Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize!"

There was a pause, then, "Not acceptable." The telephone on the other end was hung up.

Sethwick threw himself up and ran around in a small circle until he realized what he was doing. Then he collapsed in his reading chair, closing his eyes, his heart not just racing now, but pounding as well. It was early spring and already they were using that deck.

Which meant that he would be facing the same situation all through the coming months, during the warmth of summer and early fall. How in God's name would he ever accomplish a single thing here? His work, the work of a Nobel Prize winner, had been virtually brought to a halt, by those *things* next door. It was absolute madness!

Sethwick got up again and returned once more to his desk. This time he dialed 0. When the local operator answered, he said, "Give me the White House, please."

"Which?"

"The White House, in Washington, D.C.!"

There was silence, then, "The White House?"

"That's what I've now said twice."

He could hear her begin a small

giggle, then regain control. "Your number, please?"

He gave it to her. "And make this person to person, please, to the President."

"The who?"

"The President of the United States!"

Now her giggling began full force, and then there was sudden silence as, he realized, she switched herself off until she could stop the infernal laughter. At last she seemed to find that possible. And he was listening to her again, as she reached the White House, where an impersonal voice asked in boredom:

"Who is calling, please?"

"Raymond Sethwick!" Sethwick said loudly. "Winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace!"

"The voice suddenly livened. "Mr. Sethwick?"

"That is correct! If the President is busy, would you please ask him to return my call at his earliest convenience? I'm at home, in California. My number is in his files!"

A pause, then: "There is a three-hour time difference, sir. I believe the President has retired to —"

"Raymond Sethwick!" Sethwick repeated. "Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize!"

"Yes, sir! We'll get right back to you, sir."

Sethwick hung up and rose to cross the room to a cabinet bar. He poured a small amount of brandy, drank and immediately

felt calmer than he had in the past hour. The telephone began ringing — no more than two minutes had gone by. Sethwick took his time returning to it, sat down, lifted it and said, "Raymond Sethwick here."

"How marvelous to hear your voice, Mr. Sethwick," said the President of the United States.

"Thank you, sir," Sethwick said, in control of himself once more, feeling back on familiar and trustworthy ground. "I very much appreciate your returning my call, sir." He had met the President three times: once, in New York City, during the other man's campaign, when Sethwick had agreed to endorse him; again, in Los Angeles, when Sethwick had introduced him to a luncheon gathering of the leading intellectuals of the area; and finally, in Washington, when Sethwick had been invited to the White House, along with other American Nobel Prize winners.

"It's my pleasure indeed, Mr. Sethwick," said the President.

"I called because —" Sethwick paused, seeking the proper phrasing.

"Yes?" the President asked, a definite urgency in his voice now, as though he were expecting voluntary counsel, from Sethwick, on the problems of world peace.

"It may be improper of me, Mr. President —"

"Nonsense! From a man such as you, Mr. Sethwick, my ears are always open. I consider it a rare

privilege that you've seen fit to call me. Ideas, Mr. Sethwick? About the Middle East? The Far East? Possibly Cambodia?"

"Ah, no, sir," Sethwick said, and then decided to get on with it directly: "This concerns, specifically, a group of boorish young men who have rented the house next to mine. They drink beer, use dope, and play their dastardly stereo at full volume as they sprawl on their deck and shout at one another.

"I have found it impossible to have them silenced. I have, as recently as a half hour ago, explained the problem to the local police chief, but to no avail. I am wondering, sir, if you might use your influence to correct the situation I have described."

There was silence for a time. And then, at last, the President began laughing. He laughed for perhaps a full minute, during which time anger rekindled in Sethwick's bloodstream, speeding his heart once more.

"Yes, Mr. Sethwick!" the President managed fully. "I do remember your delicious sense of humor. I recall, especially, your toast during the Nobel Prize dinner here at the White House. Something about high trust, honesty, and the integral importance of peanuts!" The President laughed again, then, "Delightful, Mr. Sethwick. Good wit is an essential ingredient to counter the pressures of this office, and —"

"I did not present that toast."

Sethwick said grimly. "That was given by a physicist!"

"Oh?" the President said, suddenly sobering. "I see."

"I am quite serious about this situation next door, Mr. President."

"Yes. Yes, I detect that."

"I want them silenced."

A pause, then, "I know, of course, that you lost your wife — nearly a year ago, wasn't it, Mr. Sethwick?"

"That's true."

"Grief is a terrible thing, really. Most difficult to handle, and —"

"I am no longer in grief over that, Mr. President. If you wish me to be completely honest, I never was in grief, over that."

"Oh?" the President said again. Silence once more, and then, "I do understand, of course, the monumental emotional stress involved when one has reached a very high pinnacle, in your case winning The Prize, in my case winning the Presidency. There is apt to be a strange emotional mix-up, following such a high point in one's life. I understand, especially in the case of writers, that some Nobel winners have allowed their lives to be submerged into an ocean of alcohol, following the award. But that is such a waste, Mr. Sethwick. And it would seem to me —"

"I am not drunk, Mr. President! I am simply asking that you do something about that horrendous

situation next door!"

Another pause, then the President said, in a suddenly cool and detached fashion, "Of course, Mr. Sethwick. I shall — ah — certainly — ah — look into it. Thank you so much for getting in touch."

Sethwick held a dead telephone and replaced it to its cradle.

The noise from next door went on . . .

IT WENT ON UNTIL after four-thirty in the morning, at which time the music dimmed slightly as the monsters left the deck and slid the glass doors shut against an increasing cold. Then the music stopped altogether and they obviously fell into their beds, where they would remain until early the following afternoon.

Sethwick was, of course, still awake, still dressed in his casual attire, still seated in his favorite chair, his eyes reflecting unlimited fury and the deepest of hates.

At last, having made up his mind, he rose and walked down to step out of the house at ground level. He moved across the lawn to the structure next door. The garage door there was still up and open, with their nasty-muffled sports car resting silently.

He looked inside at the dash, and knew instantly that he would not have to return to his own garage to gather up the tools he'd learned to use when his wife was off bar-hopping. The animals had, typically and carelessly, left their

ignition key in place.

Sethwick closed the garage door behind him and stood beside the sports car and shouted at his fullest volume: "*Swine!*"

He listened and heard no response.

Then he went up steps as familiar as his own. He looked through each room, finding them lying insensibly, on this bed, on that, with all of the indications of narcotics-use evident.

He called out: "*Pigs!*"

There was not a twitch of reaction from any of them in his view.

Well, he thought, there was no one with any authority, in this town — and that would certainly include the police chief — who had the temerity to associate him with the action he was about to take. This despite the manner in which his wife had died a year ago.

Even as he conjectured the point, he imagined he could again smell that acrid odor as it came through an open ventilator in his bedroom that night, when it had been his fortune to have been sleeping beneath an open window.

No, they wouldn't. Having won The Prize should be sufficient to put them off. When you added the fact that the President of the United States had returned his call last night — and how long would it take for that stupid telephone operator to get *that* word around the community? — his immunity from any sort of official investiga-

tion, as a suspect for having caused the situation that would eventually be found in this house would be solidly sealed.

He opened all ventilators. He closed all windows.

Then he returned to the garage and got into the sports car. He turned the key, starting the engine with a roar. He worked the gas pedal furiously, as grey exhaust ejections darkened the room.

When he was nearly choked and blinded by the fumes, he got out of the car, leaving it running, and

left the garage through a side door, which he carefully closed behind him.

He returned to his own house, the short journey clearing his head.

He went back to his study and sat down again in his comfortable chair and began chuckling, *relishing* the quiet, knowing that it would continue now, knowing, too, that the premise of his last book had been precisely correct. It had to be, no matter the limits to which one had to go, peace at any cost.



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THE SEQUEL

by FRANK SISK

Miss Vail was wealthy, Miss Vail lived alone, Miss Vail was a methodical woman. Hence, she was a tempting target for felony. But the lady knew one little fact that her burglar did not.

AS SOON AS MISS VAIL entered the living room, she sensed it had been violated in her absence. Coming to a stop on the thick blue carpet, she looked and listened for whoever might still be there. At first she saw nothing amiss, and the house was sepulchral in its mid-afternoon silence. Then she realized what had alerted her — the acridity of cigarette smoke which still lingered faintly in the air.

Well, that takes the cake! Miss Vaill told herself. *Broken and entered by a person impudent enough to smoke while going about his criminal business!*

An instant later she noticed that the drawers of the satin-wood escritoire across the room were sagging open, contents scattered around the pale cabriole legs.

A damnable outrage she thought in anger.

Miss Vaill, a sturdy woman in her late forties, wore a pin-striped gray gabardine suit perfectly tailored to a manner of unaffected hauteur. She walked briskly to the escritoire and viewed with a grim expression the littered evidence of invaded privacy. On the lacquered writing surface lay a monticule of cigarette ash. She flicked it into the air with a kid-gloved hand.



"Absolutely disgusting."

Getting down on one knee, she began to pick up the odds and ends — checkbook fillers, bank statements, bills paid and payable, appointment diary, exotic recipes (neatly clipped but never used) from magazines, two recent postcards from her nephew Robert . . .

She never kept anything of real value here, but it irked her acutely that some skulking pilferer should treat her personal trivia as so much chaff.

"*Brazen bastard!*" she muttered, struggling back on her feet.

It was not an expression she would have used in public. It was one of several come down from her father and sentimentally treasured for private use in moments of extreme provocation.

She returned the retrieved items to their proper places. Closing the drawers, she scanned the pigeonholes and realized at once that the silver snuff-box was not where it was supposed to be. Her father had employed it solely as a paperweight and occasionally she'd used it for the same purpose. Most of the time, though, it reposed in the first pigeonhole to the left. Now it was gone.

"Thieving son of a bitch!" Another of her father's expressions.

Until this moment she had regarded the snuff-box as valuable to nobody but herself, a family heirloom, a quaint momento of a more gallant era. Its niellated inlay depicted the Liberty Bell with 1876 etched beneath it. Its original owner had been her great-grandfather, a snuff-addicted sea captain. She supposed the little box

might command a good price as an antique.

She next discovered the loss of a matched platinum pen and pencil, a gift she had lavished on herself two Christmases ago, when stock dividends had been unexpectedly high.

Mad enough to spit bullets (a figure much favored by her father), she marched into the dining room en route to the study where the downstairs telephone was stationed. But she detoured when her sharp eyes detected the door to the sun porch slightly ajar.

The thief had gained entry by cutting a neat square from the plate-glass panel near the brass doorknob, which enabled him to reach the pushbutton lock. Like a sample of craftsmanship, the square of glass lay on a wrought-iron tabletop just outside the door. A right-angled slit in the sun-porch screening told the rest of the story.

Inwardly fuming, Miss Vaill hastened to the study, and she was surprised to see her portable electric typewriter still sitting on the center of her work table. She had used it that morning to tap out a letter to Robert, primarily to explain Molly's temporary change of abode.

Well, she reflected as she removed her gloves, if the witless scoundrel failed to take the typewriter he probably left the

kitchen sink.

She reached for the phone and dialed Operator . . .

THE TALL SCRAWNY MAN introduced himself as Detective Paul Goggins and presented a badge to prove it, wore a brown suit as slack as the flesh under his eyes.

"I thought you people traveled in pairs," Miss Vaill commented, showing him into the living room.

"Only in cases of violence," Goggins grinned quickly, wearily. "Or on television."

"That makes sense. Will you be seated?"

"Thanks, ma'am, but first I'd like a look at the point of entry."

"This way then."

On the sun porch the detective glanced cursorily at the excised glass and the slashed screening with an air of inordinate fatigue. He touched nothing.

"Will there be fingerprints?" Miss Vaill asked.

"I don't think so. At least not the ones we'd want." He began to study the outlying terrain. "This cat knows his cover," said as if to himself.

"What did you say?"

He turned, a sleepy smile saddening his gaunt face. "That tall hedge on the other side of the driveway and your garage. They pretty much conceal the

lower floor of this house from your next-door neighbor."

"I like my privacy."

"So does the cat who cased the place."

"Cased. Do you mean the burglar might have had my house under observation?"

"That's the way it's usually done by a pro, ma'am. You reported to our desk man that you left the house for a few hours after lunch and discovered the break when you returned. Is that substantially right?"

"Yes. I went to the post office and then to the library to return a book and, oh yes, then to the drug store, the Ethical Pharmacy on Woodland Street."

"Do you normally leave the house on errands in the afternoon?"

"Yes I do. Not every afternoon but nearly every."

The detective took a small notebook and a ballpoint pen from the breast pocket of his brown suit. "On those afternoons when you do go out, Miss Vaill, do you generally stay away for a few hours?"

"Always. I'm a methodical woman, Mister Goggins, and I don't believe in these days of high gasoline prices of spinning my wheels to no purpose. As a result, I try to accomplish as much as possible whenever I use my car."

Goggins jotted briefly in the

notebook. "So that gave our boy a reasonable period of safety. Yes, you were cased all right, Miss Vaill. Can you tell me what was taken?"

"Yes. After phoning police headquarters I conducted a fairly comprehensive survey. Then I typed up a list. If you'll come to my study I'll give it to you." Leading the way through the dining room, she said, "Fortunately the sneaky swine didn't appropriate my typewriter. Nor, for that matter, the portable television in my bedroom."

"This cat steals only what fits in his pockets."

"You sound as if you know him."

"We know the type, ma'am."

In the study, Miss Vaill took a sheet of paper from the work table and handed it to the detective. "I've set a monetary value only on items I'm sure of."

Goggins scanned the neatly typed list:

1. *Silver snuff-box, circa 1876*
2. *Platinum pen and pencil — \$300*
3. *Man's wristwatch, Patek Philippe*
4. *Pair of diamond earrings — \$500*
5. *Man's gold signet ring*
6. *Colt revolver*
7. *Approximately \$25 in currency*

Goggins looked up from the list. "You happen to know the caliber of the revolver?"

"Thirty-two, I believe. It was my father's. After his death I planned to dispose of it but never quite did so."

"The watch and the ring. Also your father's?"

"Yes."

"May I keep this list?"

"You may. I have a carbon."

AN HOUR LATER, finding herself bemused in the study, Miss Vaill decided to fill the time before dinner with a bit of filing. She kept carbons of everything she typed, another trait inherited from her father.

Sitting at the work table, she pulled toward her the shallow wicker basket containing a sheaf of goldenrod onionskin. Topmost, of course, was the copy of the list she'd given that detective.

With a pencil taken from a leather cup she jotted his name — Goggins, Paul — and the date across the upper margin. The next carbon was addressed to the proprietor of a greenhouse from whom she'd recently purchased a —

But how could that be? The letter to Robert had been written just prior to lunch, the last thing she'd typed. Consequently its carbon should be next in the pile. With a severe frown she leafed one by one through the

onionskins. Then she checked the wastebasket which, as usual, was meticulously empty.

The copy of the letter to Robert was missing.

Why?

Detective Goggins was making an oral report to Lieutenant Borelli before committing it to paper.

"This heist at the Vaill residence, it's got Spider Skelly's trademark all over it."

"Tell me more."

"Prosperous neighborhood, broad daylight break, a house with a blind side, occupant generally absent a few hours in the afternoon, glass cutters used and we can count on gloves —"

"What did he get?"

"Not a hell of a lot. He did get a piece though. Colt — probably a thirty-two. The lady wasn't absolutely sure."

"What was she doing with the thing?"

"Just letting it hang around. Belonged to her father. He's dead."

From the welter of paper on his desk Borelli winnowed a preliminary complain form. "Miss Jobina Vaill. Is she unmarried or just liberated?"

"Unmarried." Goggins hid a yawn against the back of his hand. "Formidable spinster pushing fifty."

"No kith or kin?"

"Not even a cat."

"No need, then, to anticipate a double shuffle here."

"Not a chance."

Borelli was referring to certain events which had recently followed three burglaries the police were inclined to attribute to Spider Skelly. In each of these cases, the victim of the housebreaking became several days later a victim again — of a shakedown artist this time.

Variously described as black-, red- or gray-haired, well-dressed, between 35 and 40, tall, slender, this smoothie rang the front-doorbell of the recently burglarized house at mid-morning when only the wife was home. Introducing himself as "Mister Jones," he began his patter by saying he'd come to discuss the welfare of "Jenny" or "Billy" or whatever the name of the woman's school-age child might be.

In every case a child in the early grades was involved and "Mister Jones" always knew their names and the name of the school attended. His knowledge also included a few facts about the family's financial status — the amount in their savings account, for instance, and which bank held it.

"Mister Jones" was pithy and unequivocal:

"A female associate of mine is parked at your child's school. Her car is equipped with a CB radio. In one hour, if I don't in-

struct her otherwise, she will introduce herself to the school principal as a dear friend of yours and say that you're leaving town because of a family emergency and must take the young one with you. My associate, your friend, has volunteered to drive the youngster home while you're busy packing a bag.

"This charade won't be necessary, of course, if you exercise good sense. I advise you to get your bankbook right now and we'll go to your favorite branch and withdraw some money."

In the last case, the victim, disclaiming posession of a savings account, tried to buy the man off with something under \$100 she had in her purse.

"Mister Jones" promptly set her straight.

"In the Riverview branch of the Tri-State Trust you and your husband have a joint savings account in the amount of six thousand one hundred and fifty-three dollars and some odd cents. So let's get cracking before a serious accident overtakes your offspring."

"Mister Jones's" specificity in this third case was what finally prompted the police to perceive a connection between the burglaries and the shakedowns. Whoever was lifting the family jewels and loose cash was also picking up valuable information about the householders and

passing it on to the shakedown artist for a fruitful followup.

ODDLY DANGLING ARMS, a slight stoop and a quick, somewhat spraddle-legged gait were the factors which had earned Spider Skelly his nickname. An hour before noon, he scurried into the dim cavern known as John's Good Bar. The several drinkers hunched over their boilermakers spared him not a glance.

He made his way to a high-backed booth conveniently close to both the men's room and the rear exit.

"Top o' the mornin', Jock," he said in a whispery voice as he sat on the wooden bench.

Across the table a shadow replied in tones of lilting mellifluence. "And how do you do drop, Spider baby?"

"A caper yesday, it netted me like a square day's pay, but still it wasn't a total loss, Jocko. Note name and address. Miss Jobina Vaill, fourteen Kingston Road."

"Miss? Since when is a miss a good hit?"

"Right now this miss is."

"How so?"

"She's babysittin' a kid. Here." Spider produced a twice-folded sheet of onionskin and a penlight. "Read this. It gives the whole setup."

A fat waitress added her weight to the gloom. "What can

I get yuz, boys?"

"A beer," Spider said.

"The same," Jock said.

When the waitress departed Jock unfolded the sheet of onionskin, snapped on the pen light and directed the thin beam over the following type-script:

My dear Robert:

Thanks for the scenic views of Coeur d'Alene. Though both cards were mailed five days apart, if one is to credit the postmark, they arrived here simultaneously. The postal service these days is a constant source of puzzlement.

Card No. 2 struck a lighter note than No. 1, which leads me to think your holiday away from familiar surroundings is having a salutary effect. Though never blessed with a spouse, I can vicariously appreciate the pain of

losing one, and your Joan was so young and lovely. The automobile is becoming infinitely more dangerous than guns.

Your inquiry as to Molly's welfare must elicit a rather mortifying confession. She's cute as a button and I love her dearly, but her presence here required more supervision than I was qualified to give, inept maiden lady that I am. In consequence, when Mrs. Gregory, who comes once a week to clean house, offered to take her off my hands



for a few days. I fear I jumped at the chance.

Mrs. Gregory, whom I've known for years, is reliability personified. Besides, she has two children who simply date on Molly. Better still, she resides on a farm in Waterfield, which means your little darling isn't confined indoors most of the time as was the case here. And to assure you further, I pay her a visit every other day and find her thriving in the Gregory ambience.

For this apparent breach of trust, please forgive

*Your loving aunt,
Jobina*

Jock switched off the penlight

as the fat waitress set the beers on damp cardboard coasters. When she withdrew, Spider lighted a cigarette and said, "What you think man?"

"What's her bank balance?"

"Locally, not much. Less than a grand in a checking account."

"Then what are we talking about?"

"Wait a sec, Jock. This dame aint no strugglin' housewife saltin' a couple bucks away for a rainy day. This is big bread, Jock. She deals with Chase Manhattan and Merrill Lynch. Stocks and bonds and certificates of deposit."

"So what good does that do us, Spider?"

"Listen, man. I spent a quiet sixty — seventy minutes inside the premises. I know what to look for. I see signs of money everywhere I look but not much I can carry out. Then I find a rent bill for a safe-deposit box at the Woodland branch of the First State Savings Bank. I

begin to get the picture. That's where she keeps the big loot. That's where the family bau-bles are."

"It's merely a guess."

"Based on experience, Jock. I seen a picture of this dame on her bedroom dresser. By Bachrach. Very formal. And she's wearin' more ice than the Queen of England. So if the stuff ain't in the house it's got

to be in the safe-deposit box."

"Now you're making sense," Jock said, lifting his beer.

"You get the stuff, man, and we'll fence it out of state. By now the local fuzz must be puttin' two and two together."

MISS VAILL WAS on the sun porch, giving the crab cactus its weekly ration of water, when the doorbell chimed. Setting the watering can on the floor, she checked her wristwatch: 11:50. Almost time for lunch.

The man at the door was tall, slender, fashionably dressed, his dark hair streaked with gray.

"Yes?" Miss Vaill asked through the barely opened door. Since the burglary two days ago she found herself being uncharacteristically wary.

"My name is Howard Jones," the man said in a pleasant voice. "I've got something to tell you about Molly, Miss Vaill."

"Molly? Oh, Lord, don't tell me something's happened to her!"

"Not as yet. May I come in?"

"Yes, of course." She opened the door wide. "Have we met before, Mister Jones?"

"Never," the man said, entering the hall.

"Then how do you know my name? And what's this about Molly?" She closed the door.

"I know quite a bit about

you, Miss Vaill. For instance, you have fobbed Molly off on your cleaning woman in spite of the fact that your nephew entrusted her to your custody."

"How would you know a . . ."

Then it struck her — the missing carbon of her letter to Robert. Why, this man must be the skulking son of a bitch who had burglarized her! And here he was, back again, bold as brass, bent on some other felony. "I believe I'd better phone the police," she said.

"You better not, Miss Vaill. Molly is still enjoying the best of health at the Gregory place, but she's being watched right now by an associate of mine and if you —"

"What utter gibberish!"

"Please let me finish. My associate is sitting in a car with a CB radio. Unless he gets a good word from me in an hour's time, he's going to scoop up that child and take her on a

ride to nowhere. Do I make myself clear, Miss Vaill?"

He had made himself quite clear.

Miss Vaill read two newspapers daily, with a perverse interest in crime stories. Hence, she recognized the situation for what it was — a type of shakedown which reportedly had been practiced with success several times in the last few months. Even the Name —

Jones — was the same. This led her to consider the man, whom she already judged a bit of a fop, somewhat of a fool.

Trying none too successfully to give the impression of hopeless resignation, Miss Vaill said, "All right, sir. What would you have me do?"

"That's more like it," Mr. Jones said, smiling the charmer's victory smile.

Mr. Jones followed the procedure as outlined by the newspaper reports of earlier cases. He drove the victim in her own car to a bank where she had an account and waited outside while she withdrew the money, reminding her beforehand that any attempt to notify a teller of her plight would endanger the life of a child.

In all of the previous cases, the frightened victims had obeyed instructions. Returning to the car with the money, they had then been driven to the monkey cages in the Pembroke Zoological Gardens and left there, half a mile from the nearest public phone. Police always found the victim's car, wiped clean of fingerprints, not far from one of the Gardens' several entrances.

Well, nothing succeeds like success, Miss Vaill reflected as Mr. Jones parked at a 10-minute meter directly in front of the Woodland branch of the First State Savings Bank.

"You know what to do, Miss Vaill," he said, a menace in his smile. "If you value Molly's life you'll do exactly as instructed."

With a peremptory nod, Miss Vaill began to get out of the car.

"Just a second." He handed her a dime. "For the meter. We don't want a ticket."

Miss Conroy accompanied Miss Vaill into the vault which housed the safe-deposit boxes. On the table where you signed the require form stood a phone.

"I really don't want to open the box today," Miss Vaill said. "I just came in to use the phone."

"Why of course," Miss Conroy said, bewildered but polite. "Any time, Miss Vaill."

Miss Vaill dialed 0 and asked for the police. When she reached the switchboard she asked to be connected with Detective Goggins . . .

Late that afternoon, in the detective bureau, Miss Vaill identified, among other items, her great-grandfather's silver snuff-box and signed complaints against Messrs Jones and Skelly.

"Is that all for the moment?" she asked.

"One more thing, ma'am." Goggins glanced sleepily at the carbon of her letter to Robert, which had been found on Mr. Jones' person. "Molly here. How come you took a gamble she wasn't under surveillance by some creep?"

Miss Vaill permitted herself an amused grin. "If you'd care to drive out to the Gregory farm with me, I'll show you why."

"Oh?"

"You see, Mister Goggins, Molly is a german shepherd bitch."

Goggins closed his eyes.

Next Month's Headlines:

SEVEN TO DIE by BRETT HALLIDAY
The New Mike Shayne Short Novel

GET RICH QUICK by ERNEST SAVAGE
A New Novelet by a not-so-old Master

One for the Road

*Jennings gift to Bascomb
was very valuable — but a
small return for \$1,000,000.*

by
**JAMES
HOLDING**



VICTOR JENNINGS, idling down the Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich, decided on impulse to enter the antiquities shop. Gilded letters in graceful script traced the name *Gallantier Freres* on the small shop front.

Inside, Jennings found himself in a large, richly decorated salon, more gallery than shop. Heavy oriental rugs covered the floor. Niches, shelves and display cases, paved with blood-red velvet, contrasted dramatically with the stark, off-white walls and set off, with quiet elegance, the ancient objects exhibited upon them under the beneficent glow of hidden

lighting.

These objects were of infinite variety, from a T'ang figurine to a Mayan stela, from shards of Hittite pottery to a broken-handled Mochica jug from the rainless littoral of pre-Inca Peru. With most of these antiquities Jennings was totally unfamiliar. He was confident, however, that Hugh Bascomb would recognize and rhapsodize over them all.

An elderly Swiss came forward to greet him. The man was short in stature, semi-bald. He had the high color of good living and the faintly obsequious yet complacent air of a man who sells costly mer-

chandise to the very rich. He smelled discreetly of lime after shave lotion.

"May I serve Monsieur?" he asked in impeccable English, touching the fold of his gray ascot with a manicured fingertip. "I am Gervase Gallantier."

Jennings said, "I'm looking for a gift for a friend."

"A friend interested in antiquities, I presume?"

"Oh yes. Back home in Miami, he's got a fairly famous collection of his own."

Gallantier had heard this statement many times from Americans and was unimpressed. In his experience, American collectors usually had lots of money but very little taste.

He said politely, "Do you know where his major interest as a collector lies?"

"I'd say mostly Greece and Rome."

"What kind of antiquities does he particularly favor?"

"Vases, weapons, jewelry, wine cups . . . oh, I don't know, really. What difference does it make?"

"If you could be more specific, it might help me to recommend a suitable gift for him. Something he would prize as a worthwhile addition to his collection."

"Oh! Well, the last time he showed me his stuff, he was very excited about a couple of gold and silver ornaments that supposedly came off a horse's harness somewhere."

"DO YOU REMEMBER what they were like, these ornaments?"

"Only vaguely. It seems to me they had mythological stuff on them — a three-headed snake, dragons with wings."

"Aha!" exclaimed Gallantier, breaking into a smile. "Thracian harness plaques! Undoubtedly Thracian. So now we have something solid to guide us, Monsieur. Come look at this." He took Jennings' arm in a light grip and drew him toward the end of the gallery.

They halted before a velvet-lined niche which displayed in solitary grandeur a drinking vessel about ten inches high. It was shaped like a cow's horn and fashioned of silver. The open end, four inches in diameter, was rimmed by a frieze of golden maidens engaged in trampling grapes. The lower, or pointed, end of the drinking horn consisted of a goat's head, horns and forequarters, delicately worked in gold.

"This," said M. Gallantier, "is a goat rhyton from ancient Thrace. A beautiful companion piece for your friend's Thracian harness plaques. I have not the least doubt it would please him greatly."

Jennings regarded the rhyton narrowly. He was no expert, but it did look to him as though the drinking vessel before him might have originated with the same artisans who had worked Hugh Bascomb's harness plaques. Certainly it was very beautiful, the silver

horn softly burnished, the golden carvings exquisitely wrought. M. Gallantier was right: it would please Hugh Bascomb enormously.

Jennings said, "What will you sell it for, M. Gallantier? I know nothing about antiquities except that they are old . . . and usually very expensive." He gave the antiquities dealer a half smile. "So lay the bad news on me, okay?"

M. Gallantier's answering smile was positively incandescent. "In Swiss francs or American dollars?" he asked.

"Dollars, please."

"Twenty-two thousand, five hundred."

"Wow!" Jennings was honestly astonished. "That *is* expensive. Twenty-two thousand for an old drinking cup." He peered more closely at the rhyton. "Furthermore, there's a hole between the goat's front legs!"

"That was intended for the wine to flow through," explained Gallantier. "I assure you the vessel is a bargain at that price. It came into my hands only last week from Istanbul."

"Turkey? I thought you said it was Thracian?"

M. Gallantier murmured, "We must remember, Monsieur, that Istanbul *was* a Thracian city long ago. However . . ." He made a deprecatory gesture. "This lovely piece actually comes from a site in Bulgaria. It was unearthed by a workman digging a foundation

for a state market building in a village fifty miles north of the Turkish border. So of course it is Thracian . . . of the third century B.C. I meant merely that it came to *us* from Istanbul after it was successfully smuggled out of Bulgaria."

Gallantier drew a handkerchief from his breast pocket and patted his lips. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "it was smuggled out of Turkey, too. In the bell of a tuba, actually." He laughed, a thin echoless sound. "Don't you find that amusing?"

"Hilarious," said Jennings. "But twenty-two thousand dollars! And smuggled, at that!"

Gallantier turned sober at once. "I shall be frank with you, Monsieur. One reason for its high price is exactly that — that it is smuggled. It is, you must understand, illegal to export archeological treasures from Bulgaria or Turkey. The runner who delivered this rhyton to me thus demanded a stiff price, naturally. To which I have added only enough to allow *us* a small profit."

"Well. How about getting the drinking cup into the United States?"

"You have no law against importing antiquities. Even smuggled ones."

"I'd want you to ship it for me. Is that possible?"

Gallantier nodded. "Air Express, insured."

Jennings made up his mind.

"It's a deal then," he told M. Gallantier.

Gallantier beamed. "Your friend is a lucky man to receive such a gift." He began to write out a bill of sale in neat, banker-like script. "What is his name and address, please?"

"Ship it to Mr. Hugh Bascomb, Bascomb Construction Company, Miami, Florida."

"Very well," said Gallantier, writing it down. "Would you care to enclose a card perhaps?"

Jennings grinned. "Yes, I guess I will." He scribbled a few words on the back of one of his business cards and handed it to M. Gallantier. "Send that along in the package."

SOME DAYS LATER, the Thracian goat rhyton rested regally atop a glass table beside the swimming pool of Hugh Bascomb's home in Coral Gables. Hugh Bascomb himself lounged in a chair nearby, sipping a dry martini and gazing with unrestrained admiration and pride at the magnificent gift he had received at his office the day before from his old friend, Victor Jennings. He wished that his wife, absent on a visit to her sister, could have been there to admire the ancient drinking vessel.

A neatly uniformed maid emerged from the house. "A gentleman is asking to see you on a matter of business, sir."

Bascomb took a sip of his cocktail. He smiled at the maid. "Busi-

ness on Sunday? Who is he, Maria?"

"The name is Arbuthnot," said the young, heavily-mustached man who had brazenly followed Maria to the pool patio. "I'm sorry to interrupt your happy hour, Mr. Bascomb, but I need to ask you a few questions, please. Important ones."

Bascomb fixed him for a moment with the intimidating basilisk stare for which he had grown famous, then said, "All right, Mr. Arbuthnot. Sit down." He turned to the maid. "Thanks, Maria." She left them.

As he sat down beside Bascomb, Arbuthnot's eyes went to the Thracian rhyton on the table. "What a beautiful thing!" he exclaimed.

"Yep," said Bascomb proudly. "It's a Thracian drinking vessel. Which reminds me. Shall I have Maria bring you a drink?"

"No thanks." Arbuthnot leaned forward in his chair, and held out a small leather folder. "I'm FBI, Mr. Bascomb. Local office."

Bascomb was startled. "FBI? What have I done now, for God's sake?"

Arbuthnot shook his head, smiling. "Nothing. I merely want to ask you about Victor Jennings. He's a good friend of yours, isn't he?"

"He is," Bascomb acknowledged. "And why is the FBI interested in him?"

"We're checking him out at the

request of North-South National Bank."

"Vic Jennings is a vice president of that bank. They know all about him. So why do you come to me?"

"Jennings is on his vacation right now, Mr. Bascomb, as you probably know, and we can't seem to get in touch with him. We thought you, as a close friend, might be able to help us."

Bascomb said, "Surely he left his vacation itinerary at the bank with his secretary?"

Arbuthnot shrugged. "Apparently not all of it. Do you know where he planned to spend his vacation?"

"Sure. He's moving around. Monte Carlo, Estoril, the Bahamas, places like that."

Arbuthnot sent him a sharp look. "Mr. Jennings is a gambler?"

Bascomb grinned. "He likes to gamble, if that's what you mean. Especially at roulette."

Arbuthnot brooded. "He didn't mention any of those places at the bank. He told them he planned to spend his time in Switzerland."

"Aren't a man's vacation plans his own business?" Bascomb snapped. "Anyway, he was in Switzerland. Probably only between planes, but he was there." Bascomb jerked a thumb at the Thracian drinking vessel. "He sent me that from Zurich."

Arbuthnot sat erect with a frown. "That drinking horn?"

"Yep. Sent it to me as a present. It arrived yesterday."

"From Zurich — you're sure?" Bascomb nodded.

Arbuthnot was silent a moment, his eyes fixed on the rhyton. "You said it is Thracian? An antiquity? Doesn't a thing like that run into pretty serious money?"

"Yep. Pretty serious."

"But Mr. Jennings sent it to you as a gift? Would you care to venture a guess, Mr. Bascomb, as to what it might have cost him?"

"Don't need to guess. The bill of sale that came with it said twenty-two thousand, five hundred dollars."

Unexpectedly, then Arbuthnot smiled, showing regular white teeth fit for a TV commercial on toothpaste. "A very expensive gift, wouldn't you say?"

"Sure. But what's wrong with that? We've been close friends ever since college. The guy's a bachelor, his money's his own, he probably had a good session at Monte Carlo or wherever, and he thought he'd send me a present."

Bascomb smiled. "Maybe he was drunk at the time."

"Is he a heavy drinker, too?" asked Arbuthnot quite seriously.

Bascomb snorted. "Oh, come on, Arbuthnot! What's this all about? Has Vic made a boo-boo at his bank, or what? Why do you want to get in touch with him so desperately?"

"Because he has embezzled, the way we figure it, more than a

million dollars over the past three years at the North-South National Bank, Mr. Bascomb . . . probably to finance, in the light of what you tell me, gambling trips all over the world."

Bascomb stared at him. "You're out of your tree if you think Vic is an embezzler!" he said angrily, but Arbuthnot noticed that his words lacked conviction. "A million bucks? How could Vic embezzle that kind of money?"

"Easy. He gets a commercial loan to some real individual approved by the bank. Then he gets a cashier's check issued to that person. Then he converts the check to his own use.

Bascomb nodded. "I see. Well, why not wait until Vic comes back from his vacation and ask him about it?"

"Because this time we're afraid he won't come home," said Arbuthnot. "This time he's loaned himself enough money from the bank for a permanent vacation."

Bascomb put his martini glass down with a click on the table beside his Thracian rhyton. "Using whose name?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.

"Yours," said Arbuthnot. "Which brings me to the other question I want to ask you. Does the Hugh Bascomb Construction Company have a half-million dollar loan at North-South National?"

Bascomb's expression was answer enough. "I never borrowed a nickel from North-South."

"In that case," said Arbuthnot, snapping open his briefcase, "will you examine the signature on this loan application and tell me whether you can identify it as yours? Take your time."

Bascomb looked at the signature and shook his head. "Not mine. Not even a very good imitation."

Arbuthnot got up to go. "Thank you, Mr. Bascomb."

"Wait a minute," Bascomb said. "Where do you suppose Vic'll head for with that much of the bank's money in his pocket?"

Arbuthnot shrugged. "Somewhere we can't get at him, presumably."

"To extradite him?"

Arbuthnot nodded.

"What do you think his chances are of getting away with this thing?"

"About ninety percent, I'd say. Based on the statistics of such frauds."

"In that case, I guess I ought to tell you something," said Bascomb.

"Yes?"

"Vic admitted to me in writing that he's guilty."

Bascomb reached out an arm and plucked Jennings' card from the bowl of the drinking vessel. "Here it is." He handed the card to Arbuthnot.

Dear Hugh: Herewith a small expression of my thanks for the use of your name.

Yours, Vic



CONCRETE EVIDENCE

by
CRAIG WEEDEN

Reed was set to stonewall the hick cop — but the Cape Cod Lieutenant had a better idea.

BILL REED WATCHED the police car turn into the entrance of Chatham Heights, a leisure community set in gently rolling hills on the south side of Cape Cod. He finished his drink, put the glass in a file cabinet and returned to his desk. Scattered about his office were architect's renderings of a golf course, clubhouse, pool, tennis courts, and marina.

The Heights would be Bill's last project before he retired, an impressive capping off of a career that had seen him rise from a carpenter's helper to project supervisor for Alden Homes, Incorporated.

In the following silence Bill regained his self-control. He rare-

ly lost it, but this two-bit local whose idea of a good time was drinking beer and watching the Celtics had gotten under his skin. It was his arrogance.

What did Eldridge know about the power involved in developing raw acreage into investment property, about controlling millions of dollars worth of materials, men, machinery? Who did he think he was? Bill walked to the window and waited.

"Tell me about last week's board meeting. It was Wednesday, wasn't it?"

Bill knew the lieutenant already had the answer. There were no secrets from the secretarial grapevine.

"Well?" Eldridge insisted.

"Well, what?"

"Wednesday?"

"Yes, you know that."

"And Waterman — was he there?"

"You know that, too," Bill said as he remembered how seemingly well the meeting had gone. Waterman's idea about rerouting the sewer system would save the corporation some eight thousand dollars. Old man Alden himself had come over and shaken Mike's hand.

"You always hire such competent people?" Eldridge asked. He walked around the desk and sat in Bill's chair.

The intercom squawked. It was Sally. "Lieutenant Eldridge is here."

Before Bill could reply, the door opened and the cop strolled in. He was tanned, stocky, and wore his shirt open at the collar. His suit was definitely off the rack.

"Found the truck," the cop said as he placed both hands on the front of the desk and leaned toward Bill, "but Waterman wasn't in it."

"Where?" Bill asked. The policeman seemed to tower over him. It made him feel powerless, something he could not tolerate.

Eldridge picked up a pencil and studied it as if he had never seen one before. "Anything else you want to tell me?"

Bill leaned back in his chair. He watched his adversary toying with the pencil and wondered what his game really was. Finally, he stood up to make the confrontation a little more equal.

"I told it all Monday," Bill said, stretching his wiry frame to its full six feet. He was three inches taller than the cop.

"Suppose we go over it one more time."

Bill sighed. The cop was getting on his nerves. "Mike Waterman worked for me for almost five years —"

"It was six last time."

"Six then! If you want it in hours, talk to Sally! She keeps the records."

Bill worked hard to keep his composure. "I try to."

"How hard."

"Very."

"Even the subcontractors?" asked the cop as he swung his feet onto the desk.

"Everyone who works for me," Bill said, deliberately spacing each word to control his rage, "is the best I can find. All the subs take pride in their work. Most have been with me for years."

"Well, got to run," said Eldridge, suddenly getting up. He walked straight toward Bill and stopped when their faces were only inches apart. He stuck the pencil in Bill's pocket, pivoted, and headed for the door.

"By the way," he added, not turning around, "the truck was on a sandbar north of Monomoy. We had to wait for low tide to haul it out."

Eldridge opened the door, then looked back at Bill. "There was blood on the seat." He winked and left.

Bill shook visibly. He sat down at his desk, got up, and paced around the office as if to reassert his claim to it. He was not comforted when, some minutes later, he saw the police car drive off. He took the pencil from his pocket, broke it, and hurled the pieces into the wastebasket.

The intercom squawked again. Again it was Sally. Could he come out? There was a problem.

Bill went to the file cabinet and removed an amber flask. He took a quick swallow, then filed the bottle under E. For emergencies, he told himself. When he opened the

door, he could hear the heavily accented voice of Jerry Milardo above the noise of the office machines.

"it'sa no right! I no order nineteen yards concrete for thata house! I order seventeen!" Jerry jerked his hand in front of his lips as if pulling each syllable from his mouth. "You understand! I'm doing the basement floors twenty-five years. I no order too mucha concrete."

"Forget it, Jerry," Bill said as he reached Sally's desk. "Here, give me those invoices."

The red-faced Italian held out the papers in a hand with fingers fat as sausages. Bill grabbed the crinkled invoices, scribbled his initials, and passed them on to Sally. Unconsciously, he placed the pencil in his pocket.

"I no makea mistake."

"Come on, Jerry," Bill said, putting an arm over the mason's shoulder and escorting him to the door. "Sometimes things just get out of hand. How's the wife?"

Sally had the explanation ready when Bill returned. "Jerry poured four floors on Bayberry Lane Monday. Tuesday, when the invoices came, I noticed Lot forty-three required an extra two yards. I figured if Jerry miscalculated, we'd deduct the difference from his check. It's only forty dollars, but it adds up."

Bill smiled. Sally had been one of his best decisions since he became project supervisor. A widow,

she was smart, good-looking, a great office manager, and knew an incredible amount about ordering materials. She also had the uncanny ability to anticipate his questions.

"Lieutenant Eldridge poked his head into Jerry's and my discussion. He mumbled something about competent subcontractors."

Bill felt his stomach curl into a knot. He remembered Eldridge sitting at his desk. "What house was it?"

"Forty-three," said Sally. "On Bayberry."

As he drove through the Heights, Bill knew that things were coming to a head. Even though threatened, he felt secure in his belief that he could, and would, handle any challenge. He wasn't about to give up. Not when he felt the same surge of power that came as he stood on the rafters of some partially framed house and looked out over the entire development. Sure Eldridge had had him on the ropes earlier, but that was only round one.

The police car was parked in the driveway at Lot 43. Bill pulled the pickup truck in behind it.

Eldridge was sitting on a sawhorse in the middle of the basement floor. When Bill entered, the cop flipped his cigarette through the opening in the concrete that would eventually be a garage door. "You like these basement garages?" he asked Bill.

"Inflation being what it is, they're a way to cut costs. We put them in when the slope of the lot permits."

"I always wanted to live in a big house," the detective said. "What do these go for?"

"A hundred and fifty thou and it's yours. Pool and other options extra." Bill wondered where Eldridge's sudden interest in houses would lead. But he was willing to wait, willing to play the game.

"You know," the policeman said as he changed his position on the sawhorse so that the contractor would not get behind him, "how long I've been on the force?"

Bill shook his head.

"Twenty-two years. Joined right after I got out of the service. I could retire —"

"If you say so..."

"— and live off my pension except for one thing. Go ahead, ask me."

"What thing, Lieutenant?"

"I'd starve. And that ain't my style. No way. So I take a special interest in you guys that come to the Cape with your big-city backers, you guys that put up quickie developments, make big bucks and run. Guys like you and the one you work for — Reed."

Bill flinched at the sound of his name. This conversation wasn't anything as expected. He felt his adrenalin being diffused. He was impressed by the cop's technique.

Eldridge was a dangerous man.

"Let's talk about murder," Bill said. He thought he had caught his opponent off guard.

"Oh, yea," the cop replied, "I'm arresting you for murderer-one. Cigarette?"

"Seems to me all you've got so far is a truck on a sandbar. How do you make it murder?"

"I got evidence, Mr. Reed, good hard evidence. But first, let's get back to that board meeting."

"Suits me."

"Mike Waterman really impressed the big boss, old what's-his-name?"

"Alden," Bill said in spite of himself.

"Right — Alden. Well this Alden, he realizes that you approved the original sewer plan. And that your error was going to cost him an extra eighty grand."

"I'll take that cigarette," Bill said. He had to have something to do with his hands.

The cop held out the pack and continued. "This kid Waterman's been to the university, an engineer. And damn if he don't show up the field-trained project supervisor. And this wasn't the first time, just the most obvious. How'm I doing?"

"Not bad for a theory," Bill heard himself say in a voice much steadier than he felt.

"Suppose this supervisor is closing in on retirement and he knows that for old man Alden money is the only name of the

game. Why if I were that supervisor, I'd be worried sick about being replaced by this engineer hotshot. Especially if the office manager and I were raking a cool ten percent off of each subcontractor's materials. Why I'd be worried enough to —"

"You're bluffing. You've got to have a body. Just because a guy disappears for three days doesn't automatically mean murder. He could have eloped."

"And parked his truck on a sandbar?"

Bill turned and looked toward the street as if visualizing the lot fully landscaped.

The detective stood up and as he did his suit coat opened revealing the handle of his service .38. He faced the contractor. "Turn around, Reed. I want you to hear this."

Bill moved slowly.

"I talked to Milardo. He's a fine mason. The best."

"So?"

"So he doesn't make two-yard errors. He said he leveled the gravel himself on Saturday. Somebody had to dig a lot of dirt out of here between then and Monday morning. Somebody who realized the corpse would displace a lot of gravel —"

"And he took out too much."

"Why not?" the cop asked. "It was dark both nights. No moon. Even with the lights from the truck —"

"It's still a theory, Eldridge!"

"You want evidence, concrete evidence? Look at the floor. *There* — where the basement stairs will be. It's a whole lot greener than the rest. That means it's curing slower, that it's a whole lot thicker!"

Bill was silent. He knew their game was coming to an end. Finally, he spoke. "You think Waterman is under there?"

"You tell me. I'd hate to put a pick and sledge hammer to this beautiful floor."

Stunned, Bill looked the cop straight in the eyes. He realized the man was offering to make a deal. "You're not arresting me, are you?"

"No," Eldridge said, "maybe not."

"What do you want?"

The detective walked out of the basement and turned slowly to

view Chatham Heights. By looking carefully through the scrub pines, he could make out white-caps on Pleasant Bay.

"I want Waterman's job."

Bill's disbelief must have shown on his face because Eldridge kept talking.

"I figure you've got four or five more years before you finish here. Time enough to train me. When you retire, I take your place, kickbacks and all. It's your only choice."

Bill drew a dollar sign in the sand with the toe of his shoe, then pivoted on it as if putting out his cigarette. He walked up to the cop and stopped when their faces were only inches apart. He pulled out the pencil he had signed Milardo's invoices with and slipped it into the cop's pocket.

"Call me," he said, "when you're ready to start."

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